

# Stay Standing

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A magical infection has Ron critically ill, but after the devastation of the war he decides his family and friends don't need to know. How long can he hide it though? And how will the consequences of his actions change the course of the future?

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# Part 1: The illness

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

"It is our choices... that show what we truly are, far more than our abilities."

## Albus Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

### Part 1: The illness

It was subtle. Suspended hundreds of feet in the air on his broom with eyes watching the quaffle ball fly through the sky from Bill to Ginny he rolled his shoulders in an attempt to abate the ache. The ball raced into Bill's hands even as George sped towards the two to retake the game.

Charlie seemed to rise up out of nowhere and skimmed so close to Bill that their clothes touched. Charlie fell into a barrow row moving in the opposite direction and Ron smiled as Bill realized belatedly that he was no longer in possession of the ball. Ron hovered in front of a ring conjured up specifically for the game. Ron gingerly rubbed his hands, a habit he'd developed over the last year or so, in a subconscious attempt to rid them of the moderate spasms of pain hitting them every few minutes.

George whooped while Harry cursed from his position of keeper on the other side of their makeshift field. Ron knew it was driving Harry crazy to have the position of keeper. It required a person to wait for the action to come to you rather than the other way around. Harry *needed* to be in the middle of action. Sitting on the sidelines was a nightmare for him. Ron snickered.

He, Charlie and George made up one team while Harry, Ginny and Bill made up the other. Down below Hermione sat on a bench

outside the Burrow with a book in her hands. Every once in a while she would glance up and smile at them all with a contented air about her. Fleur would come out once in a while and even participated in a game or two, but for the most part she was more interested in telling Mrs. Weasley how to *correctly* mash the potatoes or steam the rice. Mrs. Weasley was busy muttering under her breath in ways that caused many of the Weasley children to grin wildly and finally understand where Ron inherited his foul mouth.

Teddy Lupin, Harry's godson, was asleep in Fred and George's old room. It had been agreed upon by Harry and Andromeda, Teddy's grandmother, that it would be in the best interest of the child if she were to take care of him. Harry would be able to finish his Auror training and have some time of freedom that way. Harry still got long visitations and on occasions such as this Teddy came to him for the weekend so that Andromeda could have a few days off.

Another whoop of joy filled the air as Charlie managed to get the ball past Harry. Ron's smile grew. It had been a while since he'd heard George laugh. Not since Fred died. It was good for the sole owner of Diagon Alley's Weasley's Wizarding Weezes. It had been a month since the funeral held in mid-May and the depressed air around the Burrow had been hard pressed to lighten even with baby Teddy's giggles.

All Weasleys unanimously agreed to stay for the summer in order to pull everyone together after Voldermort's defeat. Harry and Hermione were just as much Weasleys as the rest of them at this point. Even Percy was there, though he still went to work during the day, he would return by five each evening. There was still some disgruntlement between the Weasley siblings, but in the light of losing one of their own, holding a grudge seemed like a luxury.

"Heads up!" Charlie called as he threw the quaffle back into play.

Ron rolled his shoulders again. It was subtle. He first noticed its presence after Slughorn's little Christmas party, but honestly thought nothing of it. The ache had spread from his arms to his shoulders

slowly throughout the second semester of their last year at Hogwarts.

The pain had intensified during the summer before the Hocrux hunt began, but since he had more pressing issues to worry about he'd dismissed it as unimportant. It spread down the middle of his back by the time he dived under the ice to save Harry and spread to his chest some time during their planning of Gringotts infiltration. Still it really only bothered him once in a while when the pain became intense, but otherwise it just annoyed him so he continued to ignore it.

His legs ached a bit now though and he found it harder and harder to lift things with his hurting arms. His hands possessed an ever present tremor to them now, slight, but evident to anyone who paid close attention. For the first time in his life he was relieved to be ignored by his family as they gushed over his best friends. And his two best friends were so busy they hardly had time to breath let alone pay attention to such little things.

He knew something was wrong, but going to a hospital because he was sore and tired really didn't sit well with him. George and Ginny would give him a hard time, laugh at him and tease him about what a baby he was. Harry and Hermione would get that petulant indulgent look on their faces that they did whenever he complained about something like his overcrowding siblings or overbearing mother.

Bill would not tease him for it, but Ron knew he would silently think lesser of him for not being able to deal with something so trivial just as he'd done when Ron had abandoned Harry and Hermione during the Hocrux hunt. Charlie would be disappointed in him for whining about such a small matter and though he too wouldn't say anything he would get 'those' looks. Percy would be indifferent. That was how his family was, you don't complain about something like a cold or a broken arm, you just deal with it.

So even though the ache in his body bothered him a great deal he wouldn't say anything because it was the Weasley thing to do. Being strong in the face of adversity and not whining like a child in the face

of triviality. If he did go to the medics he would do it quietly and inconspicuously as possible.

The quaffle was aimed to fly over his head, but Ron raised both arms and knocked it away with his fingers. A spasm of pain ran through them and he almost flinched, but he managed to hold the reaction off. A disgruntled huff from Ginny above him and a low growl of displeasure below from Bill mixed in the air in a reassuring manner. Their family was a little broken up but not in pieces. Fred's missing presence was a gaping hole only time could heal, but they had each other to make that time less burdensome.

For now.

"I thought I had you that time." Ginny muttered.

"It will take more than that Gin." Ron replied good naturedly.

# Unwanted Attention Ch1

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. If I did Ron would have a bigger part, 'cause he's my favorite character.

"The best of us must sometimes eat our words."

## Albus Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets.

Chapter 1: Unwanted Attention

*" Ginny is ten times the Weasley you will ever be."*

*" She probably has more Weasley in her pinky than you."*

*" I can't believe you're related to us."*

*" Me neither, he must be adopted."*

*" Exactly."*

*" Picked out from..."*

*"... someone's trash heap."*

*" Probably a Malfoy's."*

*" Undoubtedly."*

*A six year old Ron sobbed and tried wiping at his eyes.*

*" M sorry I won't tattle on you again." Ron wailed.*

*" Too late for that now."*

*" Ginny would never have done it in the first place. Right Fred?"*



*" Absolutely right George."*

*" M sorry! I'm sorry." Ron's cry's pittered off to whispers and hiccups.*

*" Stop crying. It's like you were born the girl or something."*

*" Not like... 'is.'"*

*" Your right. Ginny wouldn't cry like this."*

*" She'd have hit us for talking to her like this."*

*" So it's decided then."*

*" Ickle Ronniekins gets the doll for Christmas and Ginny gets the quidditch figurine."*

*Ron cried harder.*

*" Please don't. I don't want a doll." Ron begged through his hiccups.*

*" Can you imagine when were all in Hogwarts together George?"*

*" Uh... don't go there."*

*" He's going to..."*

*"... totally embarrass us. I know."*

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"Is there anything more you can tell us about the actually meeting with Voldemort by yourself?"

"Are you really dating Ginny Weasley or are you secretly seeing the prestigious Minerva McGonigall as Rita Skeeter suggested?"

"Is it true you had a threesome with two males in Shrieking shack?"

"Did Dumbledore tell you the secret to his power?"

"Bloody hell! Leave him the fuck alone will you, you vultures!" Ron spun around and roared.

The reporters from the Daily Prophet looked at the redhead with annoyance, but did back up a few steps. Hermione beamed at Ron as he turned back to Harry and pulled a face of exasperation. Harry nudged him with his elbow and gave him a grateful smile.

The trio sat inside a small café a few blocks away from Diagon alley in a failed attempt to stay clear of the paparazzi following their trail. Hermione and Ron suffered to a lesser extent than their friend Harry, but when the three were together in public it seemed to be at its worst. Today they were meeting George for lunch and to talk. It was the beginning of June now and George was preparing to open the shop up to the public again which meant a great deal less time at the Burrow.

To help stem the obvious loneliness overwhelming him at his twin's death the Weasley siblings had decided that George would meet with at least one of them each afternoon for lunch till the end of summer. After that Ron, Hermione, and Harry, who would be performing their Auror training nearby at the start of August, would attempt to eat lunch with him whenever their schedules allowed. At first George was hesitant to accept their help, as all Weasleys are apt at, but it was obvious that he was in desperate need of company and so had agreed.

It was rather painful to hear George start off on a joke and pause... waiting for his other half to know and finish the last part before looking around and flinching. Then he would turn back and grin and finish it himself. Harry would just smile kindly and understandingly at him while Hermione would avoid looking directly at him.

Ron wouldn't be bothered by the response at all, in fact it appeared as if he'd missed it altogether with the way he carried on the conversation so easily with a grin, but Harry, Hermione and George knew Ron saw it. It was just Ron's way of saying that he wasn't going to treat George like a fragile doll. George would jump into the

conversation again with ease after that and his eyes would shine with relief and gratitude. No one else in the family seemed to be able to handle George's depressed bouts as well as Ron, but then again Ron had experience.

Ron knew how to handle someone who wanted to feel normal in a horrible situation because he was Harry's best friend. When Harry had rumors flying around him Ron treated him like normal while Hermione tip toed around him. When Sirius died Ron would fight back when he lost his temper instead of stare at him with understanding or stomp off like Hermione. When everyone else at Hogwarts treated him like he was a hero of some kind Ron just rolled his eyes and shrugged before asking him to pass the butter like he was any other student.

So where Hermione and Harry faltered and petered off Ron simply kept moving and talking as if the world were the same as it was before. He was also the only one who didn't hesitate to bring up Fred's name. Ron would blatantly ignore the hurt looks on everyone's faces as he reminisced about a particularly good prank or a late night up talking with hot cocoa.

At first Hermione was furious at Ron for doing these things and would angrily yell at him the first chance they were alone. They had angry bouts every other day and Harry feared that they would call off their relationship over it. Then one day when the three of them were up all night and Hermione and Ron got into yet another argument something different happened. Ron went rigid and quiet at Hermione for calling him a heartless pig before looking at the both of them with tears in his eyes.

"So what? Are we all supposed to just stop talking about him 'cause he died? Are we supposed to forget he existed and wallow in self-pity? I've seen families refuse to talk about loved one's for years before they were comfortable with mentioning them again. I refuse to let Fred become a depressing point. I want my family to remember all the things he did and all the laughs he caused NOT his bloody

body on the fucking ground!" Ron hissed at her before stomping up to his room and going to bed.

Harry felt proud of Ron for that and for all the things his best friend had done for him since he entered Hogwarts. Often times reporters had come up to him and asked 'why Ronald Weasley? You're the boy who lived and who killed Voldemort, why have such a normal bloke as a best friend?' Harry would just shake his head and smile at them indulgently.

Ron was far from normal. No one else would or could put up with everything he'd dragged Ron through and still keep going as if it was nothing. Sure Ron lost his temper and complained, but it was always about trivial stuff. Ron never said a word about how Harry caused Ron to have to endure horrible articles about him in the paper. He never said anything about the danger Harry put him in. He never said a word against the times he'd dragged him into dangerous situations or how much of a burden it was to be continuously pushed to the back because of Harry's popularity. Ron would and had gone to hell and back for Harry's sake, but it was much more than that.

Ron made him laugh in dark times. Ron treated him like any other person no matter what. Ron was there to lean on when he simply didn't have the strength. Ron never mentioned the serious stuff, the depressing and horrifying stuff, unless Harry himself brought it up. Ron focused on the trivial stuff because to him that was more important than the scary stuff. And he was right. Ron forced him to focus on the everyday life experiences when he would otherwise be overwhelmed by the scary stuff. That was what made Ron different. Where others would be overwhelmed Ron shined because he could handle it and continue on.

During the Horcrux hunt Ron had lost that while wearing the necklace containing Voldemort's soul. He'd been terrified for his family, listening to the radio for their names and the dark whisperings of Tom Riddle at the same time, and been overwhelmed. They'd gotten into an argument and Ron left. Harry had yelled at him to

leave in his anger, they'd all been tired and miserable, instead of focusing on getting the necklace off like Hermione had.

Ron and Hermione had been understanding when he was wearing the necklace and yet he'd lost his temper when Ron had worn it. They knew how dangerous and horrible it was to keep it near a person and yet he hadn't considered that because it was Ron and Ron wasn't ever supposed to get overwhelmed. Ron was supposed to be able to handle the necklace better than him because Ron didn't let things get to him as easily as he did.

It was moments like that, that Harry realized how people must view him, the boy who lived. Invincible. Someone who *couldn't be beaten*. They expected him to never falter, to always know what to do, and how to get it done. It was how Ron sometimes saw him like when he expected Harry to know how to find the Horcruxes before they left. It was as if Harry wasn't even a person at all. He'd felt guilty about holding Ron in that respect and then to hear that his best friend had wanted to come back the very *moment* he'd apparated away after the Hocrux was lifted made him cringe worse.

So when Ron stumbled back into his life a few weeks later, saved his life, and then destroyed the very hocrux that was the cause of it all there hadn't even been a thought of not forgiving him for leaving. The whole ordeal made him remember that Ron was just as human as he was and made him value his friendship with Ron that much more. The people at the Daily Prophet were fools for ever thinking Ron was just another person among the crowd.

"So you lovely ladies been waiting here long for me?" George called as he approached.

Harry laughed as Ron scowled over at his older brother and flipped him the bird.

"Ron!" Hermione scolded, but her lips were twitching at the corner of her mouth.

"Ah... is one of my lovebirds not in a good mood." George crowed as he sat down.

Ron glared at him, but instead of answering he motioned the waitress over. They each ordered and when they got their drinks George made a point of thanking Ron with a fake flirtatious fluttering of his eyes. Ron whipped his straw out of his drink and sent some of the soda into George's face. A mock look of hurt on his features, George turned to him and Hermione who were both struggling not to smile, and asked in a very serious and subdued manner;

"Was it something I said?"

Harry and Hermione couldn't help it anymore. They leaned against each other laughing and holding their sides. George broke out in a grin while Ron glared darkly, muttering under his breath in such a way that they were all reminded of Mrs. Weasley, which just brought an even worse fit of laughter.

When the food arrived Harry gladly tucked in, avidly trying to ignore the reporters waiting in the corner of the shop for him to leave so they could pounce. George told them how he'd had to scourge the entire shop because of the many layers of dust. Hermione told them the absolutely *fascinating* fact that dust was made mainly out of dead skin particles that nearly made him lose his appetite. Yet that brought a question to his mind. If dust was made out of skin particles then why did abandoned places with no one around get so dusty?

CRACK!

Harry choked and turned towards Ron. His friend had a disgruntled look plastered on his face as he bent down and picked up the broken cup he'd accidentally dropped. George bent down to help him as a waitress walked over with a towel in hand.

"Sorry. I'll fix it." Ron told the woman as she kneeled to help.

"Don't worry sweetie, happens all the time." She replied.

"Especially to this clumsy arse." George piped in.

When they finished picking up the pieces, and reassembling it, the two brothers sat back down at the table. For a few minutes everything was back to normal, but Harry noticed Hermione's eyes were on something and she had a worried expression on her face. He followed her gaze and found what it was. Ron's left hand was casually placed on the edge of the table, but shaking slightly. Harry looked at his best friend's face and was surprised to find that nothing appeared out of the ordinary. Ron was talking to George like he'd been this entire time. He didn't seem flushed or sick or anything of the sort. Ron didn't even seem to notice his hand was shaking at all.

"Ron..." Hermione spoke up. When Ron turned to her questioningly she continued. "Do you feel alright?"

Ron looked at her owlishly, tilting his head towards her, and eyebrows furrowing.

"Yes..." Ron answered, unsure where this came from.

George too was looking at Hermione like she'd fallen off her rocker. Hermione huffed before pointing towards Ron's shaking hands.

"Your hand Ron. It's shaking." Hermione said, concern lacing her voice.

George's eyes fell to his brother's hands and Harry noticed his brown eyes narrow in surprise. Most people's eyes widened in surprise, but Harry had discovered over the years of associating with the Weasley family that their eyes all narrowed when caught off guard. Ron pulled his hand off the table and into his lap.

"M'fine. Must just be dehydrated." Ron muttered.

Harry, Hermione and George peered at Ron uncertainly for a minute, but accepted the answer. When the waitress came around again Hermione ordered a water for Ron who seemed more amused than

irritated at her mother hen attitude. Since Ron showed no sign of feeling ill they eventually let it go completely and continued on with their conversation that afternoon.

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Ron walked into the garden in search of Hermione to find her looking herself over as if to make sure nothing was out of place. When Ron snuck up behind her and embraced her Hermione squealed before turning around in his arms and meeting his steady gaze. They didn't kiss, just enjoyed each other's warmth for a few minutes. Finally Hermione broke the silence.

"Freshly cut grass and a strong scent of ginger." Hermione whispered as she leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek. Ron wrinkled his nose at her before tightening the hold into a hug. Hermione's feet lifted off the ground a few inches before he gently placed her back onto the grass.

"How about we take one of the brooms out and watch the sunset in the clouds?" Ron asked.

"Oh Ron, that sounds lovely, but I'm going with your mum and Ginny for a girls night out." Hermione told him regretfully.

Ron's shoulders fell, but he nodded.

"Go have fun! I'll be here when you get back right?" Ron told her.

She nodded and smiled.

"Rain check on that offer?" Hermione whispered as the two female Weasley's exited the house.

"You bet."

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"More owls?" Harry asked wearily.



"More owls." Bill answered despondently.

Dozens upon dozens of letters fell onto the kitchen table early the next morning from the newest arrival of owls. Harry groaned and sunk deeper into his chair as Bill chuckled dryly. They both picked them up and went through them, making sure that no one of importance was writing, before tossing them all into a bag magically expanded on the inside.

The pile of letters had grown so large that it would take Harry, Ron and Hermione years to get through all of them. Some of them were hate mail from disappointed Voldemort followers, but for the most part they came from thankful families and fans wanting to know more about the people who saved them.

Hermione came downstairs, reaching her arms above her head in a stretch, and yawning widely. Her bushy hair was in disarray and her pajamas were wrinkled. Harry smiled warmly at her as she sat down, eyes searching blurrily for a cup of coffee, and nose wrinkled unhappily at the owls still waiting patiently for a treat.

Harry got up and poured her a cup while Bill spread a few treats across the table in exasperation. When the cup was in her hands Hermione gave him a small nod and took a large sip. Hermione was always funny when she first woke up. She was a morning person for sure, but it took her a few moments to get her bearings. Ron and Harry were the only ones fortunate enough to see her like this at school seeing as her roommates were never up early enough. She'd forced them to get up at excruciating early times on several occasions.

The owl carrying the Daily Prophet flew through the window. Harry picked up one of the owl snacks on the table and happily exchanged it for the paper attached to the owl's leg. It hooted in thanks before taking off out the window. Harry opened the paper, intending to spend the next half an hour pouring through the articles, before sighing in annoyance. " **Harry Potter pegged to join Auror training**

**this upcoming year."** Sat on the front page. Harry skipped that article.

**" Does boy who lived deserve to skip last year of school with honors?"** Harry skipped that one too. Moving through the paper Harry found that there was very little that didn't involve his name or that of his friends. Growling in disgust Harry tossed the paper onto the table. Hermione quietly picked it up, looked through it for a minute or so, before also putting it onto the table without a word. Bill didn't bother picking it up.

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"Normally I wouldn't condone ignoring an opportunity like this, but this time I think you're doing the right thing." Hermione said as she took a sip of her tea.

"Of course he's doing the right thing. If he left right now he'd be abandoning Harry. Besides he can easily do the special training later when things cool down so it's not like he's giving up the opportunity." Ginny stated.

"Yeah... what with all the paparazzi, angry leftover death eaters about, and all of us just plain recovering from the war it really is best if you stay Ron. Harry really wouldn't be able to handle all this nearly as well without you." George announced.

"I already decided all this a few weeks ago. If Ginny wasn't so nosy none of you would even know about the offer." Ron said irritably into his mug.

Charlie patted Ron on the shoulder, a grin spreading across his face, as he sat down beside him. Ron had been offered special training in Australia for Auror trainees who showed signs of being great strategists. The special program lasted a year for the specialized training or two years if one wished to perform regular and specialized training. Apparently Dumbledore, Snape and McGonagall highly recommended him for the program. Ron had been proud to receive

such an offer, but known he couldn't leave Harry and his family right now. They needed him.

"I wasn't being nosy. I was cleaning up the living room and putting *your* things back in *your* room when I noticed it on your Auror training book." Ginny explained.

Ron snorted derisively.

"It was *inside* the book and that letter's been there for a week and *Harry* and *Hermione* respect me enough to not read my things because they happen to see it." Ron snapped back.

Ginny turned her head, a distinct blush on her face, as George and Charlie laughed.

"Ron one, Ginny zero." George laughed, taking out a cookie from a cabinet and shoving the entire thing in his mouth.

"Harry wouldn't be happy to know that you're planning on giving something like this up for him." Hermione contemplated out loud.

"That's why none of you are ever going to say anything about this." Ron said firmly.

"Here, here!" George cried, handing a cookie to Ron and holding it up to toast. Ron shook his head in amusement, but toasted his cookie with George's and took a bite.

No one noticed the tremor of his hands as he did so and when they started to shake worse Ron forced his hands into his lap where no one could see. As he sat there, continuing his talk with his siblings and Hermione, Ron forced himself not to rub his arms or roll his shoulders. The ache had been almost unbearable lately.

He'd already used up all of his mother's pain reliever potion and was silently pleading that she didn't get any headaches any time soon. Hermione's had been used up months ago during the Hocrux hunt.

He only had a little bit of money on him from odd jobs here and there so he'd been holding off on buying more of the potion until the three of them started their Auror training and got the starting pay.

About an hour later Charlie and Hermione decided it was time to join Harry, Bill and their parents in bed. Ginny and George stayed up a bit longer, but not much, and soon he was alone in the kitchen. When he heard the sound of Ginny's door closing Ron let out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He brought his arms up onto the counter, and rubbed them roughly, silently commanding the ache to *go away*. Ron grimaced and leaned forward until his forehead touched the counter.

*'A shower. A nice hot shower will make it hurt less.'* Ron thought.

The redhead moved upstairs and waited patiently for the water to heat up as he stripped. Stepping into the shower Ron moaned in pleasure as the hot water touched his aching body. It didn't get rid of the ache, far from it actually, but the pressure of the hot water against his skin was like having his entire body rubbed.

Ron let himself slide to the floor of the bathtub. It had been extremely difficult to not let the other's see how absolutely exhausted he was. He'd taken a long nap that afternoon and though he'd wanted to go to bed early he knew the others would get suspicious if he did. He brought his legs up to his chest and put his head on his knees. Closing his eyes he sighed again in pleasure as the hot water slid down his back.

After ten minutes he quickly washed and got out, albeit reluctantly, with the water bill his parents had to pay in mind. Ron dried off and pulled on a pair of shorts before heading down the hall to his room he shared with Harry. The ache flared up in the center of his back forcing Ron to pause and lean against the wall for support. The corner of his vision blurred and blackened causing Ron to take in a sharp breath before slowly sliding down to his knees.

Ron stayed there for several long minutes waiting in fear for his sight to return to normal and the flare of pain in his back to die down. When it finally did he took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself, as his body shook with tremors. Ron walked to his room and opened the door, slipping in without a sound, and making his way over to Pig. As quietly as he could Ron pulled the hyperactive bird from his cage and went back downstairs.

"Shhhh Pig. I need you to be quiet for me just this once." Ron hissed.

Pulling a sheet of paper out Ron quickly wrote on it and folded it up. Placing it in an envelope and tying it to Pig's foot Ron gave the bird a treat and instructed him to take the letter to St. Mungo's.

### **Ronald Weasley requests a medical appointment at the earliest convenience.**

Ron let out a shaky breath before heading back to bed. He couldn't ignore it anymore. He needed to know what the hell was wrong with him. Ron crawled under his covers and listened to Harry's steady breathing until his own evened out in sleep.

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"Hey Harry, want to play a game of gobstones?" Ron asked as they headed down the stairs.

"Su..." Harry began before the figure of Arthur suddenly appeared. The older Weasley seemed taken aback for a moment before he straightened his shirt and smiled widely at them.

"Harry my boy! Been looking for you, listen, do you think you could explain to me how this new invention of the muggles works? Its call the EnTernut. It seems like an absolutely fascinating item. Imagine... thousands of books fitting inside of one small box!" Arthur exclaimed happily.

"Well Ron and I..." Harry started, but a soft shove from behind caught his attention.

"Go ahead Harry. I know you like trying to explain that stuff to him." Ron said quietly.

"You sure?" Harry asked softly.

Ron shrugged.

"I'll just brush up on my charms for the Aurors test." Ron told him.

Harry felt guilt warm its way into his gut as he saw Ron turn his back to him and Arthur to head back up to his room. Harry did enjoy spending time with Mr. Weasley since the man was practically his pseudo father, but he also knew that Ron barely got to spend any time with the man either. He was always working or with one of the other boys.

And since the summer began and Voldemort had been defeated he and Ron had barely been able to spend any time together or alone with Hermione. The family and the wizarding world itself wouldn't let them. They could barely breathe with how close everyone was holding them let alone really talk to each other or simply hang out.

As Harry followed Mr. Weasley into the living room, where a dismantled computer lay spread out, he promised that he'd find more time to spend with his two best friends.

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"... so the concept is rather simple really." Hermione explained.

Ron and Harry stared at Hermione with a mixture of astonishment and incredulity. Then the boys looked at each other and shook their head in exasperation.

"Hermione... can you dumb it down a little more? Please." Harry asked.

"And when he says a little he means a lot." Ron added bluntly.

Hermione sighed in irritation.

"Partial Apparition, what the Order members use, makes you move really, really fast. When you apparite your transporting your body to another place. Partial apparition is what made the Orders turn into light and the Death Eaters turn into darkness at the Ministry of Magic during the battle. Do you both notice how when a person apparites they leave a light and dark streak?" Hermione tried again.

Both of her boys nodded.

"Well when you Apparite you, for a split second, become a type of energy. Well... with Partial Apparition you stay in that form and can move at an accelerated rate because of it. That's why the Order members and Death eaters could move through the air so easily." Hermione said happily.

"Mione, I'm only so good at regular apparition, I don't think I'll be able to handle partial apparition." Ron stated forlornly.

"Nonsense! You much better than you first were and the only time you splinched yourself in the past year is when you were really stressed." Hermione said.

"Yeah... well that's all good and all, but how do we go about partially appariting?" Harry asked.

"Well Kingsley gave me a book, well not really a book, it's an instruction manual that Dumbledore wrote, but never put out to the public. It's available only to proven members of the Order such as the three of us. Kingsley is considering incorporating it into the Auror training program, but is still undecided because it's so powerful. He's afraid of it leaking to the public. It's advanced magic and having every witch and wizard trying their hand at it would be very dangerous." Hermione began, but Ron and Harry could tell that she was going into the long version of it instead of the short.

"Mione." Ron whined in exasperation.

She blinked.

"Oh... right sorry. Well you know how you have to move without haste, but be extremely deliberate while appariting. That applies here as well, but instead of turning you simple 'move' in the direction of the object. It's the third part where it gets tricky. Instead of focusing on a destination you have to continuously change objects to focus on even while your partially appariting. Oh... that's right. While you're partially appariting you can see everything perfectly normal, everything doesn't go black, but the feeling of nausea is still very much there the entire time." Hermione noted absently as she turned a page in what Ron and Harry assumed to be Dumbledore's manual.

"Well that's lovely." Ron muttered.

Harry was also not particularly keen on that prospect.

"What about the threat of splinching?" Harry asked.

Hermione looked back up from the book and frowned. Never a good sign when asking her a question. Ron flinched, evidently remembering the time Hermione side-along apparited the three of them away from Grimmauld place when his entire left shoulder and part of his upper arm had been splinched badly. Hermione, noticing Ron's flinch, blushed in shame before putting the manual down.

"That's why Kingley thinks it's too dangerous to leak out to the public. If you fail to have an object to focus on even once you'll be badly splinched and dropped wherever you are." Hermione informed them quietly.

"So if your twenty feet in the air and can't find an object to focus on not only are you going to be a bloody mess, but you'll also have a broken neck. Wonderful." Ron cynically remarked.



Harry nudged Ron hard, sending a warning glare, silently telling him he was being a prat.

"Honestly Ron you're such a pessimist." Hermione said lightly.

"Well that's easy for you two to say. The bloody genius and talented git can do anything their hearts desire. Us normal folk have to set a lower standard." Ron said, ignoring Harry's warning.

Harry groaned.

"You know Ron if you had more self-confidence maybe you wouldn't be so sardonic about everything." Hermione sighed tiredly.

"Self-confidence in what exactly? I'm just being realistic 'Mione. Out of the three of us I'm the only one that's splinched my-self. I was the last to be able to perform Patronus. I was the first one to be knocked out in the Ministry battle. I'm the last one in every class we've ever taken together in terms of grades. The only reason Harry wasn't made a prefect instead of me is because Dumbledore thought 'he already has too much on his plate.' And I was only kept on the Quidditch team because Harry was downright stubborn about dropping me after I screwed up some many games." Ron explained.

"It was only your lack of confidence that cost you those games!" Hermione snapped. "The moment you thought you had drunk the lucky potion you did splendidly! You were nerve racked the time you splinched yourself. Patronus is extremely advanced magic and the fact that you *can* perform it means you're a great wizard. Your last out of the three of us, but for school standards you above average in grades. And since we were separated it could have very well been me who was knocked out first, at least you were conscious! For fucks sake Ron stop comparing yourself to everyone else!" Hermione snarled.

The brunet young woman picked up Dumbledore's instructions manual before stomping out of the room. For several moments the

two boys just sat there in shock of their friend using such language before Harry turned toward Ron.

"If I hadn't been here the last eight years beside the two of you I never would have understood how you make a good couple." Harry told his friend honestly.

"Well that's nice. Could you explain it to me then?" Ron asked.

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**Ronald Weasley, your request has been received and your appointment with Dr. Oort has been made for Wednesday June 13, 1998 at 9:00 a.m. Please arrive half an hour before your appointment to fill out the appropriate information and to make the process for all in our office, employees and patients, that much more smooth. Have a good day.**

Ron slipped the note into his pocket as he moved the eggs on his plate around absentmindedly. Maybe he over exaggerated what had happened to him the night before... His vision only blurred for a few minutes and that could have easily been caused by something else. It was just a coincidence that his back flared up at that exact moment. The fact that he collapsed was probably more to do with his pathetic low-pain tolerance than it being serious. Even if it did cause what happened it probably wasn't as big a deal as he first thought.

The problem was probably something stupid. What if someone he knew saw him at the doctor's office and it got out that he'd needed to go because he was sore and tired? There would be no way he could look Harry, Hermione or his siblings in the eye after that. This whole thing was just stupid. He was just being a baby about it, not being able to handle a little fatigue and ache. Just Pathetic.

Maybe he should cancel the doctor's appointment? Ron put his hand under the table and rubbed at his aching legs for several minutes. Ginny, who was busy muttering under her breath about her summer homework assignments, was too distracted to notice as she munched on toast. When the sound of stomping feet came from the

stairway Ron forced him-self to stop rubbing and simply focused on eating like normal.

Harry, Charlie and Arthur came through the doorway to join them for breakfast. Ron grinned at Harry and gestured toward the seat next to him. Harry took it without a word. Molly came bustling in from the Garden at the sound of them and asked what they'd like for breakfast. The first few times Harry had been there he'd attempted to help with breakfast, but Ron hurriedly fixed that. Molly Weasley was the type of woman to feel heavily insulted if you 'helped' her in her own kitchen. It was the equivalent to slapping her in the face which was why she didn't like Fleur all that much.

Bill had finally managed to get his wife to back off a little from the kitchen and it seemed with each step Fleur took away from Mrs. Weasley's domain the more the two woman got along. Ron snorted at the thought. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Harry take a peek at him in curiosity, but Ron just waved it off. His trembling hands hadn't been nearly as obvious as they'd been a few days ago, but Ron still silently cringed as he moved his hand back where it couldn't be seen.

Since he'd gotten the scars on his arms from the brains he'd taken to wearing long sleeved shirts. Now with his hands refusing to stop there shaking he'd resorted to wearing even longer sleeves so that the ends of the sleeve touched the tips of his fingers. Lifting his hand up in a wave like that had caused the sleeve to fall. Keeping an eye on Harry he saw him turn to Charlie and Arthur to listen in to some conversation they'd started upstairs. He hadn't seen.

Good.

"Hey! You all up for a good old game of quidditch this morning?" Charlie asked as he stood and stretched after they all finished the last scraps of breakfast.

"I'm up for it!" Harry said cheerfully.

"I wish to also participate in ze game." Fleur announced.

She, Hermione, Percy, George and Bill had come done not long after the others.

"Sounds like a wonderful excuse to procrastinate! I'm in." Ginny called.

"Ginny... I would hope that you would take your classes more seriously, especially since this is your N.E.W.T.S ye..." Percy began, but everyone was already getting up and heading out the door.

Ron snickered at the put out expression on his brother's face before standing... and falling roughly back into his seat. A surprised 'omph' fell from his mouth, but thankfully no one noticed over the loud scraping of chairs and chatter. Harry turned toward him just before he exited the house.

"Aren't you coming Ron?" Harry asked in surprise.

"Um... I'll be out there in a few minutes Harry." Ron called out across the room.

Harry nodded and headed out the door after the others.

"She has no concern for her studies whatsoever!" Ron heard Percy muttering under his breath darkly. "Really! You would think after being involved with such serious events she would take her future more seriously as well."

Ron kept his face stoic in front of his brother, but his insides squirmed in panic. Ron gingerly put weight on his left foot and raised himself slowly up from the table using its surface as a balancer. Percy hardly noticed, still disgruntled about being ignored in such a fashion, as he nursed a cup of freshly made tea. His mother had thankfully followed after the majority of her children to watch with her husband.

Ron took a deep breath as he realized that, despite just getting up, he felt as if he'd been dealing with Grawp for hours. His legs were barely supporting him. The ache wasn't any better or worse than any other day so this new development both confused and frightened him. Sure there had been days when he'd felt exhausted without doing anything, but never before had he been unable to walk. Ron chewed at his bottom lip.

He tested himself. Moving but still relying on the table's surface to support him. Percy looked up from his tea and scrunched his nose in Ron's direction.

"What on earth are you doing Ron?" Percy asked, sincerely confused.

"Eh... I'm... I stepped on something sharp. I've pulled it out already, but it still kinda hurts to put weight on my foot." Ron lied.

An amused look spread across Percy's face. Lips moving to the right in a half smile. Percy nodded his head before taking a sip of his tea and seeming to go back to his own thoughts. Ron put more weight on his legs and found, to his immense relief, that he could walk around if he did it slowly and carefully. Ron went outside to where his other siblings were deciding who would be on whose team and sat down with great care in the grass next to his girlfriend. Hermione smiled at him.

"Ron! Whose team you gonna be on? There's an even number so we decided you'll just pick one or the other 'kay?" Bill called out.

There was no way he could fly on a broom if he could barely walk.

"You guys go ahead and play! I think I'm gonna enjoy my girlfriends company instead!" Ron called.

Hermione blushed scarlet while George made catcalls from the group. If he was gonna be grounded he might as well do something fun. It was always amusing to see Hermione go bashful whenever he

referred to her as his girlfriend. That's why he didn't do it often, because sooner or later she was going to get used to it and then he wouldn't get to see her like this again.

Ron moved slightly closer to Hermione and let his hand fall on top of hers. She leaned into his shoulder without a word and flipped a page in her book. The game started and Ron watched the brooms sweep across the sky most of the afternoon. At some point he fell asleep catching Hermione by surprise when his body went slack and soft snores could be heard. She lowered him gently onto her lap and smiled down at him.

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Ron was thrilled to find the next day he could walk just fine. The ache was still there, as always, but he could walk! He'd nearly jumped for joy in front of Harry when he woke up that morning and couldn't suppress the grin of relief on his face. When questioned about it Ron simply replied it was a beautiful day out today. In reality Ron was simply glad that his weakness had not been permanent. It also cemented the need for going to the hospital. The appointment was still three days away though so Ron tried not to worry about it.

He and Hermione spent the Sunday searching through shops for Harry's birthday gift. They'd decided to get them early this year so they wouldn't have to worry about it. Ron listened, half in exasperation and half in contentment, to Hermione as she complained about not being able to give Harry his cake last year as she and Ginny planned. Her tangent, as he and Harry dubbed them, went on for a good hour and a half. By that point Ron had already found the perfect gift.

A baby white snow owl. It couldn't be taken from its mother for another month, but for Ron that was perfect anyways. Harry had been devastated by the loss of his owl Hedwig and Ron couldn't blame him in the least. That bird had been bloody brilliant. So Ron happily reserved the owl and paid the woman in advance. He made a mental note to make sure the family knew so they wouldn't buy Harry any other animals.

Hermione thought the gift was 'splendid.' Much to Ron's joy Hermione clamped onto his arm after that as they walked down the streets. Hermione ended up getting Harry a gag gift of all things; a book on transfiguring and repairing glasses. The two had a good laugh at that and knew that, if no one else got the joke, the three of them would.

Before the pair apparited back to the Burrow Ron cupped Hermione's chin and softly kissed her. She smiled into the kiss and Ron got a whiff of her cherry blossom shampoo. Ron leaned his forehead down against hers as their lips broke away. They stood there, under the swinging sign of a candy shop, enjoying the peace and quiet unheard of in the Burrow.

SNAP!

Both blinked and looked up to find a reporter in front of them. Ron snarled at the man angrily before side-appariting them to the Burrow.

"Merlin, their absolutely relentless." Ron muttered.

Hermione just nodded in agreement. She was annoyed beyond belief that her sweet moment with Ron had been ruined. Silently she also noted that Ron had performed the side-along apparition perfectly.

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The next morning while going through the paper Charlie Weasley growled in anger at seeing his baby brother's picture. Ron was looking down into Hermione's eyes with a deep loving intensity. Hermione had her arms around Ron's neck as she looked up at him with the same devotion. Ron's arms were around her small waist and they seemed to be simply enjoying the moment.

"Those bastards of reporters really can't leave those three alone can they?" Charlie snarled in disgust as he threw the newspaper onto the table.

Bill picked it up and began reading the article beside the ruined intimate moment. Every minute that passed caused the slight frown on his face to deepen.

"Vat is it love?" Fleur asked as she stirred sugar into her tea.

"... while these two lovers appear to be the perfect couple it remains questionable how true that is. Hermione Granger graduated the top of her class and is considered a genius not only by her peers, but the teachers of Hogwarts themselves. Ronald Weasley on the other hand is barely above average and shows no real skill in anything. It is questionable why Ronald Weasley was the third member of heroes known as the golden trio when there is nothing golden about him. Many students at Hogwarts believe that Harry Potter and Hermione Granger are the real lovers in this trian..." Bill stopped reading, too disgusted to continue.

Fleur walked up to her husband and gently kissed him on the forehead before taking the newspaper from his grasp. She walked over to the fireplace and tossed it into the flames. Then returned to her seat with a satisfied smile on her face.

"I vink it is best not to mention zis little paper to our smallish brother, no?" Fleur asked.

Bill nodded, his frown evening out to a smile, as he moved his chair closer to Fleurs and held her hand in his. Charlie, not nearly as happy with simply burning the trash, glowered at his tea. George, the fourth member at the table that morning, decided to speak up for the first time.

"There just angry with Ron because he doesn't take their crap like Harry and Hermione do. Ron has refused all interviews and makes sure Harry or Hermione aren't bullied into them either. All the reporters know that they won't get anywhere with either of them if Ron is around. That makes them angry and since they control the paper this is what happens." George said tiredly.



"Ron's used to being bullied by the lot of us so of course he can handle the negative attention better! Harry and Hermione are too polite for their own good. Harry only had the Durseleys before he was thrown into all of this. Hermione grew up with serious doctors as parents!" Charlie said, still rather ticked.

"I believe their dentists actually." Said Percy as he walked into the room.

"Whatever." Charlie muttered.

"Someone's in a fine mood." Percy replied dryly.

"Ron and Hermione had their time out yesterday spoiled by reporters. He's just wound up about it." Bill said simply.

Charlie watched as Percy grimaced and sat down. The group of brothers were not happy about the treatment their littlest brother and his friends were receiving. Even Ginny, as Harry's girlfriend, was receiving a great deal of propaganda about her.

Early morning turned to early afternoon and one by one the house woke up for the day. It wasn't until everyone was called in around two in the afternoon for lunch that Charlie noticed who was missing. Ron hadn't come down yet.

Charlie headed up to Ron's room and sure enough his little brother was sleeping which was very odd sine the teen had gone to bed early. He pushed the door all the way open with his broad shoulders and tiptoed over to the bed with a fond smile stretching across his lips. Ron's hair poked out in uneven lumps across his head as he hugged his pillow. The long scars along the length of his arms shone prominently against his pale skin.

As he got closer Charlie frowned at the tense look on his brother's face. In fact it seemed as if his entire body was tightly wound up ready to spring. Normally he would throw Ron out of bed, but it seemed to him Ron was having a nightmare. Charlie knelt down

and gently shook the younger man awake. Despite the gentleness Ron jerked awake and looked blearily around the room. Seeing Charlie, Ron attempted to bury his head back under the pillow, and ignore his existence.

"Come on now Ron. Its late afternoon. Get your arse up." Charlie demanded.

Ron sat up quickly, staring at Charlie in panic, and something else the older Weasley didn't recognize. Ron turned to look at the clock on his desk and cursed rather violently. Charlie just grinned in amusement. Ron glared at him as he quickly walked over to his dresser. Turning his back to his snickering brother Ron took his long sleeved t-shirt off.

A large dark scar trailed from his left shoulder downwards where he'd been splinched by Hermione. The lack of a proper medi wizard's or witch's care causing the normally easily handled wound to become a permanent part of him. Then there were the scars from their battle at the Ministry. Silver scar lines stretched across his back before wrapping around his arms, but they were only visible for a few seconds. His littlest brother hurriedly pulled a long sleeved shirt over his head. The grin lessened a little at the blatant reminder of Ron's dislike towards his scars, but didn't disappear.

"I'll be happy to tell the others that our brother didn't die in his sleep." Charlie joked as he began to leave the room.

Ron stiffened and jerked at the same time. Charlie paused in his pace to stare at his brother in worry.

"You okay Ronnie?" Charlie asked in a more serious tone.

Ron nodded.

"M'fine. I'll be down in a minute." Ron answered.

"If you're sure." Charlie said uncertainly.

The dragon handler moved out of the room and back down to the kitchen where, to his vast surprise, sat the Ministry of Magic. Kingley had become a well respected minister in the mere month he'd held his position. Charlie nodded to him before gazing at Harry and Hermione questioningly at the table. Harry answered him.

"He's requesting our, me, Ron and Hermione's help for a mission tonight." Harry answered, though refused to elaborate.

He didn't like that. The three of them had already been through so much. Why were they being dragged into something else so soon? He'd been against the idea of them becoming Auror's, but really, what could he say when he handled dragons? So Charlie frowned, but didn't make a comment concerning it.

"Ron will be down in a minute." Charlie decided to say instead.

Both Harry and Hermione frowned.

"Did you wake him?" Harry asked.

Charlie simply nodded.

"Hm..." Hermione started unhappily. "He wasn't feeling very well last night. He didn't say anything, but I could tell. I wish you would have just let him sleep."

"Oh... sorry. Didn't know." Charlie replied, surprised.

He hadn't noticed anything off about Ron at all. He seemed perfectly normal last night when Charlie played Chess against him... and lost. That was the thing about having a job so far away from the family though wasn't it? You stopped being able to tell when your siblings showed abnormal behavior because you stopped knowing what their normal behavior was. He hadn't spent more than a few weeks with Ron since... he lived with him. Blimey had it been that long ago?

Charlie shook his head as he left the three of them to talk secretly. He entered the garden where the rest of the family was eating lunch and picked up one of his mother's famous roast beef sandwiches. Being an older brother of so many was both a wondrous and painful thing. Struggling to give each sibling the attention they wanted yet craving time by yourself to do what you want. Debating whether protecting them from danger or letting them gain experience was more important. Feeling the frustration when they fail and the pride when they succeed and trying to figure out what words are most appropriate.

Charlie was the second oldest so he knew how much an older sibling's words could hurt and effect choices you make further along. So with that experience he tried, and failed many a times, to curb his temper to not say anything too harsh. There was this one particular time with Ronnie when they were little that he regretted more than anything... but he couldn't take it back. Word simply couldn't be taken from a person's memory. And he was too stubborn, even years later, to apologize for it.

## Diagnosis Ch2

Disclaimer: I wish... I wish... damn. I still don't own Harry Potter. Who would have guessed?

"The truth is a beautiful and terrible thing, and should therefore be treated with caution."

### Albus Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.

Chapter 2: Diagnosis

" *Charlie!*"

" *Not now Ron.*"

" *But... there's a spider in my room.*"

" *Then don't go near it.*"

" *Charlieeeee pleasssssssseeeee can you get rid of it for me?"*

" *Go away Ron! I've got a final coming up in a few days and I haven't studied for it at all!*"

" *But... but this will only take a minute. Pleasssssssse!*"

" *I said no!*"

*He heard the sound of his brothers retreating feet and sighed in relief. Then cringed as he heard his brother knock on their parent's door. Anger filled him as he heard the door open and his groaning father whispering with Ron. Both of their parents had been awake the last few nights taking care of a sick Ginny.*

*Charlie got up and left his room to go to Ron's. Ron was pointing at something on the floor. Charlie had to squint to see it. His father tiredly took off his slipper and hit it. Then the man took a napkin from the bathroom, picked it up, and flushed it down the toilet. The relief on Ron's face was evident and filled Charlie with disgust. When Arthur walked out of the room to find Charlie standing there he gave his son an annoyed glare.*

*"You could have very well taken ten seconds out of your time to do that Charlie." Arthur said before heading back to bed.*

*Ron blinked over at his father's retreating back and started guiltily when Charlie turned on him with an angry expression.*

*"You selfish, cowardly, self-centered brat!" Charlie snarled. Ron flinched at his normally kind brother's hurtful words. "You knew they were tired because of Ginny being sick and you still knocked on their door? And because of a stupid spider smaller than a pea? Your ten years old for Pete's Sake Ron! Stop being such a coward and grow up! Merlin... Can't you ever think about someone other than yourself! I know you're one of the youngest, but that doesn't excuse being so selfish!" Charlie snarled quietly.*

*Ron looked absolutely devastated, but he didn't care. He had to learn a lesson about thinking about others. Charlie ignored the fact that it would indeed have only taken ten seconds to kill the spider for Ron.*

---

Crack!

Bang!

Wham!

Sizzle!

The plan had gone horrifically wrong.

Ron twisted, forcing his broom into a barrow roll, to avoid a curse.

The mission had been simple. Kingley simply needed them to identify the snatchers that took them prisoner to the Malfoy Mansion.

Ron performed a counter-curse he couldn't avoid and shot upwards trying to find Harry and Hermione, or anyone really, from his team.

It was reconnaissance. The Auror's tracking the suspects were unsure if they had the right men and wanted the trio to confirm before going in. Trouble was one of the Aurors wasn't exactly on their side.

Ron roared several curses out as he flew through enemy ranks and only nearly evaded a deadly Avada Kedavra. The green light flashing frighteningly close. Ron gasped and shuddered. Dropping into a cloud he then shot in the opposite direction he'd previously flown in with hopes of losing them.

It was an ambush. Set up by former Death Eaters. A last ditch attempt at revenge for their fallen leader and imprisoned death eaters. The Snatchers themselves standing smugly in the background.

There were three former Death Eaters on his tail. Ron reared his broom at a nearly ninety degree angle, a dangerous and difficult maneuver, to shake the men off. Curses flew at him angrily yet relief flooded him as he recognized a large stag patronus in the distance. Harry was using it to let the others know where he was. Brilliant.

There had been two pairs of Aurors with them at the time of the Ambush. The traitor Auror turned on his partner and killed him before they knew what was happening. Harry, Ron and Hermione had their wands out and yelling curses before the other two Aurors began even reaching for their own wands.

Ron summoned his own Patronus and lit up the area around him with its light. The men behind him yelled out in surprise and pain. It

was pitch black out, even the moon wasn't showing its face, so while Ron hooded his eyes they're dilated and blinded them.

The group of five defenders against an unknown amount of attackers made it out by the skin of their teeth and skill of their magic. The moment their feet hit the dirt outside the warehouse brooms were summoned. Unfortunately they'd been surprised by an already air born group of Death Eaters. Separated and outnumbered the battle began.

Ron nearly cried out in relief as he saw Hermione's otter swirl around a few hundred feet away. He immediately shot in her direction. Hermione was brilliant when it came to spells and magical arts, but she was a horrid flyer. Hermione had sat behind him on his broom all the way there and summoned the dead Auror's broom before taking off. They hadn't thought about it. Hadn't had time.

One hundred and fifty feet away. A light came toward him at an awkward angle. Ron dived and veered left to avoid it. One of the men came out of nowhere and nearly caused them both to topple off their brooms in his attempt to hit Ron with a curse, but Ron easily deflected it. Ron continued moving to where the otter still danced, attempting to distract and hinder the attackers of its mistress, the stag was also moving in its direction.

One hundred feet. Ron twisted away from two curses and barely dropped out of the way of a third. Then it happened. The otter started moving downward at a dangerous speed following after something. Hermione. She'd fallen off her broom. Ron felt his heart fall into his stomach in fear.

"Reducto." A man roared.

Ron felt a powerful force slam into him and wrench him from his broom. The sound of splintering wood pressed against his ears. They'd destroyed his broom. Ron didn't even have time to scream out as his body began to tumble through the air. Somehow he felt very calm about what was happening though... like at the final battle



when he used copied Parseltongue to get to the basilisks teeth and his fight with the Death Eaters after that. Ron tightened his hold on his wand and focused all of his thoughts on the death eater quickly disappearing from his sight. Then, with great deliberation and determination, he partially apparited.

It was extremely sickening. Everything was slightly blurred because of the speed he was moving and he barely remembered to raise his wand in time to incapacitate the extremely surprised death eater.

"Stupefy!" Ron roared at the wizard. The wizard above him was ripped from his broom. As the flying object began to descend Ron switched from one object, the falling death eater, to another. He felt his body lunge forward towards the broom within seconds and immediately switched to his next object. Hermione.

With every drop of thought he focused on her as she fell faster and faster towards the ground. He felt sick and his body had never been in more pain than at this moment, but none of that mattered a bit. As he moved toward Hermione, glowing like his own Patronus, he shoved the broom in front of him and shouted out his next incantation.

"Wingardium Leviosa!" Ron screamed.

The broom flew off in the direction he pointed while still focusing his thoughts on Hermione. To lose concentration on her would mean they both died. His body was propelled downward as Hermione got closer and closer to the floor. He could see trees very clearly now. Only fifty feet below him and twenty five beneath her. Ron reached out his arms as wind and air pressure ripped violently at them. He could see her arms beginning to move. The spell was wearing off, but far too late for her to save herself. His energy seemed to be falling out of him like a spilled teacup. He doubted Partial apparition was supposed to be used at such high altitudes.

His hand touched the edge of her fluttering robes. His arms went passed her waist. Ron threw his arms further out and grabbed ahold

of Hermione just as the pair fell past the tips of trees. He twisted their bodies around so that he was looking up towards the sky with Hermione clutched protectively in his arms and focused on a single broom levitating fifty feet above. He partially apparited five feet before their bodies would have smashed across the ground.

When his hands touched the broom Ron shoved it under them and ceased his magic altogether. Holding onto Hermione with shaking pale hands Ron didn't notice the otter coming up to him and lovingly rubbing its cheek to his. Nor did he notice his own terrier patronus flicker out of existence. He barely managed to lower the broom to the ground safely as the otter watched.

His hands shook as he laid Hermione's reviving form on the ground before promptly passing out from exhaustion and relief. Fifteen minutes later a very pale faced and frightened Harry Potter arrived with only one of the other Aurors. When the dark haired teen saw Hermione shaking, but safe with Ron passed out in her arms he fell to his knees in front of them and hugged them both tight.

Hermione flew with the remaining Auror on the way home while Harry carried Ron's unconscious form with him. When they were close enough to apparite Harry and Hermione carefully took Ron off the broom and put each of his arms around their own. Harry and Hermione apparited to the Ministry with Ron between their arms while the last Auror followed soon on his own. As they reported what happened to a shocked Kingley, Ron slept in the arms of Hermione, who refused to let him go for any reason.

Harry could hardly blame her. He'd seen what happened. Her body falling off her

broom and being unable to get away from his four attackers. Seeing Ron blasted off his own broom not soon after... it had been horrifying. He thought he'd lost them both. And then Ron had performed magic that he and Harry only ever heard of in concept without a single practice run in mid-air during battle? He'd been so

stunned he'd nearly been blasted by curses on two sides. The surviving Auror saved his neck.

After their report Ron woke up just long enough for the trio to stumble home and be bombarded by their family. Molly Weasley shrieked at their conditions having been woken up by the sound of them entering the house and promptly waking everyone else in her haste to get downstairs. Ron, who was leaning heavily against both Hermione and Harry, didn't even register them.

"Merlin's beard! What happened?" Molly cried as she attempted to take her son from Hermione, who wasn't having any of that.

Harry let Hermione lead Ron into the living room as he diverted a frazzled Mrs. Weasley and her followers into the kitchen. Ginny followed her brother into the living room. Harry sat in one of the chairs trembling like a leaf.

"We very nearly lost Hermione... and Ron. The mission we got turned out to be an ambush. Hermione was stupefied off her broom and Ron... Ron barely managed to get to her in time. He performed some bloody powerful magic doing it too." Harry said shakily.

Ginny came into the kitchen with a drawn face.

"Ron's fast asleep on the couch. Hermione's awake, but she's not talking, just stroking his hair and clutching onto him like crazy." Ginny announced.

The Weasley family all looked rather pale as they began asking question after question, but Molly interrupted all of them.

"They're all shaken up! You leave the lot of them alone you hear me?" Molly demanded. "Harry, sweetie, go to bed. You can tell us what happened in the morning."

Harry could only nod.

The next morning when Harry got up it was to the worried expressions of several Weasley's. Harry explained what happened, trying to tone it down on some parts for Mrs. Weasley's sake, while the others listened avidly behind her. When he finished several heads turned toward the living room where Hermione and Ron still slept unaware of their scrutiny.

"Whew." Whistled Charlie as he shook his head. "That's impressive. Are you sure it was OUR Ron who did that?"

Harry glared up at Charlie.

"Of course it was! Ron's always been brilliant, especially when he doesn't have time to self-doubt himself." Harry said the last part quietly to himself, but George heard.

"Only too right! Little Ronniekins doesn't have much self-confidence that's for sure. Not as bad as Neville, but still pretty lousy." George said.

Most of the Weasley's nodded in agreement before slowly wondering off to start the morning rituals of getting ready for the day. Despite the fact that they were all at the Burrow to pull things together there was still work to do. Bill was cataloging Curses used during the war for his work while Fleur was busy putting her curriculum together for the classes she would be teaching to young Wizards in Cornwall. George was working on a new series of gags while Ginny had to work on summer classwork. Since Charlie took so much time to be with his family the tracking team he worked with decided he would do ALL of their paperwork much to his chagrin. So the Weasley's were together, but still very busy.

At about noon Hermione woke up from her deep sleep to the sound of Charlie and Ginny arguing about what type of paperwork was worse. Harry sighed in exasperation and winked at her as she sat down beside him. The dark haired wizard noticed, with a faint smirk, that she'd still been reluctant to leave Ron sleeping on the couch.

Outside it turned out to be a fairly if not terribly miserable rainy Tuesday so everyone was forced to stay inside. As one of clock turned into two and two turned into three everyone was seen throwing Ron worried glances. At three-thirty Mrs. Weasley took to sitting next to Ron.

"Do you think we should take him to St. Mungo's?" Molly asked her oldest as she stroked Ron's hair.

"No..." Bill said slowly. "He doesn't seem to have a fever or anything. He just seems really exhausted. He's been stirring all day. Movin' from one side to the other. Just let him sleep Mum."

"Kingley said he'd probably sleep for most of the day. Partial Apparition in the air takes up a lot more magic than the ones performed on the ground." Hermione piped up from her position on the floor with a book in hand.

Molly nodded, but didn't seem particularly satisfied by the answer. Harry snorted quietly to himself at his position across from where they were playing an exploding card game. George had announced that he'd worked long enough about half an hour ago. George rolled his eyes at his mother's over worried state. Molly then got up from her chair and headed for the back laundry room to keep herself from fretting.

"Trolls, live chess sets, womping willows, criminal dogs, werewolves, Death Eaters, brains, giants, poisonings, snatchers, dragons, Voldemort, former glory hound death eaters. If my little brother doesn't stop throwing himself into the face of death every other month Mum is going to lock him up inside a giant bubble." George said lowly.

Harry choked on some spit as he tried not to laugh. It was so very true though, the three of them had been through a hell of a lot more danger than any other students in Hogwarts history these past seven years. It made sense that danger would follow them after too, especially since all three of them were going into the Auror business.

"I think she would put all three of us in a bubble if it were possible." Harry replied after catching his breath.

"And I'd never let you out again!" Mrs. Weasley cried from the laundry room behind them.

Both Harry and George jumped in startlement before silence filled the room. Several moments passed before they burst out in fits of uncontrollable laughter. Harry could hear Bill struggling to breathe nearby as he too seemed to have heard their conversation. It quickly died down though as Ron stirred and sat up. Blinking rapidly Ron groaned loudly as he took in his surroundings.

"Hey mate. Sorry we woke you. How ya feeling?" Harry asked.

Ron stared blankly at him, still not fully awake, before jerking violently around looking for someone.

"Where's 'Mione?" Ron demanded.

"She's fine! Upstairs with Ginny doing some girl stuff." Harry reassured his best friend.

Ron sagged back into the couch as Molly burst into the room and hugged Ron from behind. Harry smiled in amusement, but as Ron yelped loudly in shock the smile turned to concern. Ron grimaced in pain.

"Mum let him go! Something's wrong!" George shouted as he kneeled before Ron.

Molly let go of her youngest son like she'd been burned and ran around the couch faster than Harry would have thought possible. Harry too went as close to his friend as possible with three worried Weasley's in the room. The moment Molly let go of him Ron had bent over with his arms crossed over his chest and a moan of pain.

"I knew we should have taken him to St. Mungo's!" Molly stated angrily.

"Don' overreact Mum. I'm just really sore." Ron said with a weak smile.

Molly leaned forward again, this time more gently, and squeezed Ron's shoulder's in a reassuring, but soft gesture. She stayed there like that, as if convincing herself that he was indeed alright, before pushing Ron's hair out of his eyes. Then the killer of Beletrix Lastrange stood to her full height of five feet five inches and tutted.

"Well then, I'll just head into the kitchen and make you something sweet." Molly announced.

Ron nodded tiredly, leaning into the couch as George took a seat next to him.

"Soooooooo... how's our big ball of energy?" George asked lightly.

Ron glared darkly at him as he rubbed his forehead. Harry couldn't keep the relief from his face as he watched Ron shove George roughly. The taller redhead snickered as Bill attempted to join his brothers on the too small couch, throwing his long legs across his brothers, and putting his hands behind his head to lean on. Ron and George protested loudly.

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He blinked. Reaching his hand out to steady himself, he found a wet, slimy yet hard wall beside him. Harry stood in a dark, dank cave like tunnel that he recognized immediately. The depths of Gringotts.

"Ron? Hermione?" Harry called out.

His voice echoed in the emptiness surrounding him. Harry shivered as he slowly turned around in an attempt to place his bearings.

Clank.... Pop. Harry hissed as something burned his ankle. Peering down toward the ground Harry rapidly stepped back as dozens of gold cups rolled toward him. The burned flesh of his ankle stung harshly as he navigated his way down the tunnel and away from the horrid things. But what were they doing outside of their chamber?

"Hermione! Ron!" Harry called out loudly.

Harry's shoulder touched a large boulder as he ran and to his growing horror gold and silver pieces came pouring from the spot. His sleeve was singed. Harry moved faster, the ominous sound of popping and clattering hot on his tail, but he didn't dare look back. Harry turned a corner and stopped dead in his tracks.

The Gringott's dragon stood in front of him, unshackled, and growling angrily toward him as if it were no longer blinded. Harry backed up immediately, but howled in surprise as the back of his legs burned. Looking back he saw thousands of treasure pieces continuously multiplying. The burning metal pushed against him and forced him forward. Harry gasped in pain and terror even as the dragon bellowed in anger before him. Throwing its head back the pale fire breathing creature let loose a torrent of flames setting both Harry and the tre...

"Harry!" A voice yelled.

A hand gripped his shoulder and shook him hard. Harry sat up gasping for breath and shaking uncontrollably.

"It's okay mate, just a nightmare." Ron's voice reassured him.

Harry nodded in understanding, reaching out blindly for his glasses, which were hurriedly shoved into his hands. Gratefully putting them on Harry looked around the room for reassurance that he was indeed not still trapped thousands of feet below the surface in a thief's grave. Sweat poured down Harry's face and back in rivers and his body had yet to relax from the harrowing nightmare. He could



feel Ron's eyes on him and wasn't the least bit surprised when the ginger gripped his shoulder and pulled him to his feet.

"Come on now, let's go down to the kitchen for some hot cocoa, it will calm ya." Ron suggested.

Harry simply followed his lead. It had become a ritual of sorts when one of them suffered a nightmare. Wake the person up and get something down their throats while offering the opportunity to talk about it at the same time. There were silencing charms at the end of his, Ron's and Hermione's beds so as not to wake the others if they screamed. It would not, however, go unnoticed by one of the three of them. They'd become incredibly in tuned to each other's presence during the Hocrux hunt. Moody's mantra of 'constant vigilance' now understandable in their near nerve wrecked states.

On their way to the kitchen Ron silently peeked into Hermione and Ginny's bedroom and gazed affectionately at them for a moment before closing the door up. It had been incredibly weird and unnerving to separate sleeping arrangements between them and Hermione after the Battle at Hogwarts. In fact they'd slept in the same room, despite objections, for several weeks before being able to separate. They'd spent a year sleeping within ten feet of each other at all times and having that reassuring presence suddenly gone had been overwhelming for a period. Several members of the Weasley's and Order had given them looks of understanding yet worry during that time.

Harry sat down as Ron's flicked his wrist, summoning several objects, before quickly whipping up the cocoa. Ron tapped each mug twice, muttering under his breath, before setting them down. A constant warming spell that Hermione taught them during the winter when their drinks started to freeze from the outside chill.

Ron sagged into his chair, obviously not particularly keen to be up at... who knew what time in the morning. It was still dark outside, but the feel was morning. Harry took a large sip of the sweet, chocolate drink. Ron may not have liked being up, but the point was that he

was up in the first place. Harry gave Ron a tired smile. Ron's lips twitch upwards in reply.

"So..." Ron trailed off. "What was tonight's about?"

"Gringotts." Harry replied.

"Goblins, vault, or dragon?" Ron asked wearily.

"Treasure and dragon." Harry answered.

"Ah... it's always the suffocation of the vault that gets me." Ron admitted.

"It was a wall of gold on one side and a dragon on the other." Harry muttered through the cocoa.

"Nasty bit. Goblins are still giving Bill a hard time at the bank 'cause he's related to me. Don't think they'll ever forgive us for breaking into their impenetrable fortress and freeing their dragon." Ron smirked, attempting to cheer Harry up.

Harry's lips twitched as he fought a smile.

"No... I don't suppose they will. It's a good thing they still let me withdraw my gold at least. Although having fifteen goblins accompany me to my vault was a bit much." Harry said as a grin stretched across his face.

Ron laughed hard, hand covering his mouth in an attempt to stifle his mirth since the majority of the house was still sleeping. Ron rolled his shoulders and cricked his neck from what Harry assumed was an attempt to relieve the sleep from his joints. They stayed like that for several more hours just talking the early morning (and nightmares) away.

When the old family clock chimed at them announcing the arrival of the sun they both stood up. Harry stretched, his hands reaching above his head, and a yawn escaping his lips. Ron rubbed his arms

and peered at the small cooking watch above the stove that, unlike the family clock, actually told what time it was. Six in the morning.

"I guess we should be heading back to bed." Harry laughed.

Ron didn't smile at his humor though... instead he frowned.

"You go to bed Harry. I've actually got to meet someone this morning so there's no point. You know me... If I go back to sleep nobody's getting me up again until much later. I'm practically unconscious when I sleep." Ron replied as he started pulling things down for breakfast.

Guilt immediately settled in his stomach.

"You should have told me you had to be somewhere Ron. I wouldn't have kept you up as long as I did if I'd known." Harry said in exasperation.

"Which is why..." Ron started as he took a large bite of an apple, "I didn't tell you."

Harry rolled his eyes. Typical Ron. His best friend rolled his eyes in return before making a shooing motion with his hand. Harry sighed before heading back up to his bedroom. He was too tired to protest.

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Ron's eyelids felt like lead. It had been difficult to hide how exhausted he was from Harry. He had an inkling that if Harry himself hadn't been so tired he'd have been caught. The truth was that the ache in his arms, back and chest had been keeping him up like many nights before. He'd already been awake when he sensed Harry's unease and then terror. For some odd reason it was just easier to sleep during the day.

He snuck out of the house before his mother woke up because he knew that hiding it from her would have been impossible. Three cups of coffee later saw him sitting in the hospital waiting room filling out

paperwork at eight in the morning for an appointment that wouldn't even take place for another hour. He didn't even like coffee. It was too bitter.

His head bobbed up and down, chin touching chest, every minute or so. The papers before him blurred in and out of focus. The lights above seemed to flicker though he was aware that it was simply him. At one point the pen in his hand trailed off the page and he fell dead asleep with his shoulder leaning against the wall.

"Ronald Weasley!" A shrill voice called.

Ron jerked. His whole body tensed and in less than a second his wand was held in front of him defensively. Several wizards and witches looked at him in bewilderment with eyebrows raised, but they said nothing. War had made a lot of people jumpy after all. Blushing scarlet Ron picked up the half done paperwork and made his way over to the front desk. Hurriedly finishing up a few things under the shrill voiced secretaries scrutiny Ron handed it in and entered through the door she pointed at impatiently.

A tall, middle aged man in a white coat stood on the other side. Vials of medical potions could be seen peeking out of larger than normal pockets and a wand sat tucked behind his left ear. Ron quickly stuck his hand out to shake and was relieved when the man smiled kindly at him before taking it.

"Ah... Mr. Weasley it's nice to meet you. I'm Dr. Oort. Please follow me." The man announced in a jovial manner.

Ron nervously stumbled behind the man and into medium sized examination room. Ron quickly took a seat on the cushioned patient table. Sitting down in a chair Dr. Oort clapped his hands together and eyed Ron critically.

"Now... before I do the basic examinations could you please tell me what it is that brought you here today?" Dr. Oort asked.

Ron opened his mouth before closing it again and taking a deep breath.

"It's kinda hard to explain." Ron began. At the encouraging nod from Dr. Oort Ron continued. "My body's been really hurting lately... I mean... it feels like I've got hundreds of little rocks between my skin and bones... rubbing together. Does that make sense?" Ron asked in frustration.

Dr. Oort nodded slowly.

"There are many reasons why your body might be sore or feeling aches and pains. Pulled muscles, over exertion, a misused spell, the common cold or flu... the list goes on. How long have you been suffering from this?" The man asked.

Ron rubbed his arms, attempting to get the ache to go away, considering the question.

"Well... two years... maybe three, but it wasn't very bad back then... to start with." Ron told him quietly.

Dr. Oort's eyes widened dramatically.

"Dear Merlin. Why have you not come here sooner my boy?" The Doctor paused, grimacing, they both knew the answer to that. "That certainly narrows things down. Is there anything else?"

Ron fidgeted.

"My hands won't stop shaking... I've been really exhausted lately... no matter how much I sleep. I've nearly blacked out a couple times and... the other day I had a really hard time standing and walking. I... the night before my eyesight went black for a few minutes. The pain in my body keeps me awake at night sometimes no matter how tired I am. I end up falling asleep sitting on the couch or... well... the waiting room outside... I just can't function." Ron told him. His ears were tinted pink with embarrassment.

Ron gazed fearfully at the doctor as the man's mouth opened in shock. There was deep alarm in those brown eyes that had Ron on edge. After a moment the doctor simply nodded and muttered an incantation under his breath. Ron flinched as the wand was pointed at him and a string of blue magic surrounded him like string before sinking into his skin.

Dr. Oorts eyes narrowed as Ron felt the magic go deeper into his skin. With a flick of his wrist Dr. Oort began pulling out the sting like magic again and guided it onto his blank paper attached to the clip board. The sheet began to fill with information. Ron's foot tapped absently against the tiled floor as he wearily watched the man's eyes scan the paper. Wrinkled fingers tightened around the plastic before eyes peered up at him in concern.

"I think I need a spell that goes deeper." Dr. Oort said quietly.

Ron bulked.

"Why? What does that one say?" Ron demanded.

Dr. Oort gingerly held up the clip board and tapped it to his forehead.

"This one Mr. Weasley... says almost nothing. The spell wasn't powerful enough to go past your skin which means that theirs magic blocking it from going deeper. A normal basic examination spell briefly touches all your body parts and detects magic. Not identifies, but simply detects." Dr. Oort answered, but there was a slight tremor to his voice.

"And what does that mean?" Ron demanded.

"Nothing good Mr. Weasley." Dr. Oort said honestly.

The man then preceded through several different spells, each more complicated than the last, before a large amount of papers sat beside them. Ron glanced at them every minute or so before his attention would be brought back to the doctor pouring over the

papers. The man hardly seemed to even blink. Half an hour passed in this fashion before Ron simply couldn't take the silence anymore.

"Excuse me? But what's wrong with me?" Ron demanded softly.

The man looked up, face scrunching, before he once more examined the papers in his hands. Dr. Oort tapped his knee and leaned back in his chair.

"Medical examination spells are complicated. It's given me several deep diagnosis pictures of your insides and a lot of technical explanations. This will take me at least a few hours and a second, possibly third opinion from specialists, to get through and analyze correctly. What I can tell you at this moment is that I want to keep you in the hospital until that time. You, Mr. Weasley, are extremely sick. Until we know what we're dealing with it is imperative that you stay here." Dr. Oort explained quietly.

Ron felt his heart rise up to his throat.

"What? But... How serious is this?" Ron asked, his voice laced with panic.

Dr. Oort gave him a pitying look.

"Serious enough that I'm making it my top priority today." Dr. Oort said calmly. "This... should have been seen to a long time ago."

Ron sat in the cafeteria of the hospital absentmindedly staring outside the large window at the darkening sky. People came in, ate, and left. Some would give him a curious look while others ignored or didn't notice his existence. He'd been there for hours... Twelve o'clock had come and gone, but no doctor had yet to come and get him.

His normal impatience was replaced with dread that kept him glued to his seat. Shaking hands were folded in his lap, hidden away from any prying eyes. He briefly wondered if anyone at the Burrow had

noticed his absents, but snorted quickly after. Harry and Hermione would... but his family wouldn't.

He just didn't stand out enough to notice. Bill was the oldest and kindest. Charlie was the bravest and strong enough to handle dragons. Percy was the smartest, logical and well behaved, goal orientated. George was charismatic and lit up the room with his humor and light hearted ways. Fred had been bold, cynical, and up front yet relaxed and easy going. Ginny was the girl yet strong hearted and sharp minded. Ron was just... Harry Potter's best friend. Amongst family and friends his face was simply overlooked. He was angry about it... that was just how it was.

Unlike the others he didn't have a class he was particularly good at, he didn't have a lot of interests, and he wasn't skilled at anything at all. He didn't have any real plans for the future... he was just following Harry's lead. It wasn't like anyone had told *him* that being an Auror was a good job for him. Both Harry and Hermione had been told by Moody that they would make great Aurors someday. Both Harry and Hermione had been told in their job discussions with teachers at Hogwarts during fifth year that they were well suited for the work. Harry and Hermione were sharp minded, skilled, and moralistic. Ron simply didn't want to be left behind and forgotten. Auror work sounded like a wonderful job: tracking down and arresting bad people, investigating wrong doings, protecting the people. He wanted to help purge the ministry of the corruption that allowed Voldemort to take it over so easily. Yes, Ron wanted to be an Auror, but could he do well in it? And then there was that voice that he had to squash constantly... did he want to stay in Harry and Hermione's shadow forever? He knew he couldn't be better than them and for the most part he was content to be the support for them, but there was a tiny childish part of him that still wanted other's to see what he could do.

Since he was a child there had always been that part of him that wanted to be recognized as an individual that was good and successful and *unique* . None of his brothers were Aurors, but Harry



and Hermione were as good as family as any of them. And *they* were going to be Aurors. It was no longer a unique position and what was more was that Ron *knew* that Harry and Hermione would do the job better than him. They would be promoted faster, do better, be better than him in every aspect. He'd come to accept it at Hogwarts, but in the world they would be spending the rest of their lives in?

He wanted just one thing to be all his own... something that he could accomplish without their help... because he knew them too well. When they were promoted and if they had the opportunity they would put in a good word for him... suggest him, ask for him. They simply wouldn't let him fall behind even when he deserved it. They would try to get him promoted and it wouldn't be because of his own work but because Harry and Hermione were impatient. It took Ron longer to get things and do things and if he lagged behind a bit their expectations wouldn't stand for it. He wanted to be proud of his work and accomplishments... not feel as if it was given to him.

Becoming a prefect was because he was Harry Potter's best friend. Making the quidditch team was because he was Harry Potter's best friend. Being suggested to special strategy training by three different head masters? Because they all adored Harry Potter and he was his best friend. His sister was saved from the chamber of secrets by Harry. Hermione was saved from petrification by Harry. It was Harry and Hermione that saved Sirius. It was Harry whose name was pulled out in the goblet of fire. It was Hermione's idea to start up Dumbledores Army and Harry that taught it. It was Hermione that got them through the duration of the Hocrux hunt because of her brilliance. In everything they'd ever done Ron had merely been the shadow lagging behind.

And now... Ron put his head in his hands. Damn them. Damn his hands. The tremor wouldn't leave them not matter what he did. Ron took deep breaths. Now he was sick and it didn't seem as if a simple potion was going to make it go away. Would this stop him from becoming an Auror? Was he going to die?

"Mr. Weasley?" A voice called from above him.

Ron looked up to see Dr. Oort. The man's face was stony as he gestured for Ron to follow him. Ron did so silently. They made their way into an office that held two other doctors, both witches, and closed the door behind them. Ron merely glanced at their blank expressions before looking down at the ground and taking a seat.

"Mr. Weasley... This is Mrs. Gate and Mrs. Malstrum," Dr. Oort introduced, though he was so distracted he didn't differentiate which was which. "It is of great displeasure that I must inform you about the results I received from the diagnostic spells. Quite frankly... I don't understand how you've managed the pain you must be enduring up until this point. I can only assume that your circumstances in the war is what held you back from coming to the hospital sooner." Here the man paused and Ron wanted nothing more than to shout at him to just *tell* him already.

"You have a highly dangerous magical infection that has spread through every organ system and bone in your body. It's dark magic that is somehow woven into the skin on your arms and back. It's killing you." Dr. Oort explained softly.

Ron's breath quickened. Sharp panicked intakes that had one of the female doctors by his side and rubbing his back in soothing motions. Ron folded his arms in front of him and leaned forward as he let the information sink in and focused on breathing properly. He could feel their eyes all on him filled with pity. Ron took one final large breath and slowly pushed himself up to look Dr. Oort in the eyes.

"There is a treatment that we can give you." Dr. Oort said carefully. "But there's only a forty percent chance of you surviving it and the treatment will take a long time to drain your body of the magical infection."

"How long is a long time?" Ron asked.

"About half the time it took the infection to spread... maybe more." One of the female doctors supplied carefully.

Ron took in a shuddering breath... at least a year and a half then.

"And what will happen if I don't take this treatment?" Ron asked.

The three doctors looked between each other before peering at him with sadness.

"I'd give you maybe four more months before it kills you. Perhaps shorter or perhaps longer, but the pain will continue to get worse and your body will start to shut down." Dr. Oort told him.

Ron closed his eyes. Fear gripped him and his body began to tremble worse than his hands.

"How much would a treatment like this cost?" Ron asked softly.

"Well," one of the witches piped up, "It's a pricey treatment, but it can easily be cut down into small payments each month. The important thing is getting you better. We can worry about the money later on."

So if he paid every month for the rest of his life he probably wouldn't finish paying it off. Ron felt his insides squirm. So if he lived and someday asked Hermione to marry him he would already be in debt. If he took the treatment he wouldn't be able to start Auror training for two years.

"How... what's the treatment like?" Ron asked brokenly.

Dr. Oort frowned and shook his head in weariness.

"I won't lie to you Ron... it will be the hardest thing you've experienced in your life. You're going to get a lot worse before you get better. The treatment is meant to constantly be draining your body of the infection... that means magic, energy, water, food... anything that may have come in contact with the dark magic is going to be expelled as well. And it will be painful... The dark magical infection is going to have to be slowly ripped out of your bones, organs and skin through use of the potions and shots we'll have to

give you as well as intricate spells we'll have to place on you at least once every two weeks." Dr. Oort calmly explained, though his eyes were swimming with sympathy and concern.

Ron willed the tears not to fall as his head fell into his hands once more. He was ashamed when a choked gasp escaped his lips. A single arm wrapped around his trembling shoulders and a woman's voice whispered kind promises of 'it's going to be okay sweetie' and 'You'll pull through this.' Ron was anything, but delusional though. He knew all too well that everything was not going to be okay.

# Decisions Ch3

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

"As much money and life as you could want! The two things most human beings would choose above all - the trouble is, humans do have a knack of choosing precisely those things that are worst for them."

## Albus Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone.

### Chapter 3: Decisions

*Little hands reached up to him. Ron watched in fascination and wonder when the tiny fingers touched his face. The rounded, freckled face of a baby girl with ginger hair smiled at him and he couldn't help but smile back. The almost two year old let the nine month old grab ahold of his fingers and giggled when they were sucked on.*

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*The four year old looked on in disappointment when his Ginny was picked up from their game of building blocks to be ushered into the bathroom for a wash. They would be in there for a long time, he knew, because mum loved playing with her baby girl in the bathtub while she squealed and dressing her up in pretty new clothes. Ron pouted before going in search of one of his siblings to play with. Ron went around the house till he found them, but Bill told him he was too little to play their big kid game. He wished his mum would stop hogging his Ginny. He wanted someone to play with.*

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*His mum had taken Ginny with her to go shopping for food again. Mum seemed to love taking Ginny places. Ginny was her favorite*

*and then Percy because he was such a good boy. Ron was always messing stuff up though 'cause he was clumsy and though his mum wouldn't get mad when he messed up she seemed tired of him. Mum would let him help bake stuff with her and Ginny sometimes, but they seemed to have more fun when it was just the two of them so he stopped asking. He was a big boy now, six years old, so he could play by his-self. His Ginny would be home soon so he could wait for her. He didn't care that his mummy didn't like him much because his Ginny thought he was the best. That was all that mattered.*

---

*Ron huffed as Fred and George entered the house snickering about their latest prank. He walked further into the garden and pulled a tearful Ginny into his arms. She cried and made his sleeve wet, but he didn't care.*

*" Their lying you know." Ron told her matter o factly. "Your nails aren't gonna fall off 'cause you put nail polish on. Their just being jerks."*

*Ginny sniffled loudly and looked up at him.*

*" There not?" The small girl asked hopefully.*

*" Nah. They just don't want you to turn out all girly and whiny like the other girls around here. You can be girly if you want to be though." Ron reassured her.*

*Ginny hiccupped and smiled at her big brother. She grabbed Ron's hand and squeezed it just as Fred came back out. Fred was frowning at them and his mouth turned into a sneer when Ron returned the frown.*

*" Oi faggot! Dinners ready." Fred snapped nastily.*

*Fred turned his back to them and stomped into the house. Ginny gasped and Ron's face crumbled with hurt. The seven year old and*

*five and a half year old trudged into the house holding each other's hand tightly.*

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*" Okay... Just be careful and I'm sure you can..." Ron trailed off as Ginny took off.*

*Long red hair fluttered in the wind as Ginny leaped down from the four foot drop to run after George in their game of tag. Ron felt a rush of pride as he quickly followed his little sister and partner for the game. The nine year old beamed as he caught up to Ginny and cackled in glee as he saw George scowling up at him from the ground where Ginny proudly had him pinned.*

---

*They were in front of the Hogwarts express. Ron looked worriedly at Ginny who stood beside their mum. How would she do without him? He watched after her and helped her when she was in trouble. Ginny seemed to know what he was thinking because she scurried over to him and cupped her hand around his ear.*

*" Don't worry about me! Show Fred, George and Percy how it's done!" She whispered.*

*Ron smiled and nodded.*

*" You bet!"*

---

*" Tell me about him again! Please Ron." Ginny begged.*

*Ron stopped attempting to do his summer homework to give Ginny an annoyed huff.*

*" I've told you about him over and over for weeks Gin. Harry's cool and all, but he's still just another kid like you and me." Ron told her sternly.*

*" Tell me about how he caught the snitch again! Please!" Ginny pleaded.*

*" Gin enough. I'm tired."*

*Ginny pouted, but let the matter drop.*

---

*Ron sat at the Gryffendor table across from Ginny. Ron was happy to note that unlike last year she looked like she was getting much more sleep. He'd been so worried about her during her first year at Hogwarts, but she seemed fine now. Friends. Confidence. Experience. She wouldn't need him that much this year. Somehow that made him feel a little sad.*

*" Hey Gin!" Ron said cheerfully.*

*Ginny paused in her chatter with a few of her classmates to glance at him.*

*" Hi." Ginny replied before turning back to the girls.*

*Feeling slighted Ron turned to his breakfast and ate quietly while doing his best to ignore his sister's voice. When Harry came in a few minutes later, he'd been held up by Neville in the hall, Ron greeted him with a pat on the back. Ginny noticed Harry's entrance immediately. She fully turned to him and smiled.*

*" Morning Harry! Sleep well?" Ginny asked.*

*" Like a log. You?" Harry replied with a smile of his own.*

*His good mood now officially gone Ron bit harshly into his food and ignored them both.*

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*" Ginny!" Ron called.*



*Ginny turned around and glared at him. When Ron motioned her over and away from her friends Ginny narrowed her eyes, but complied.*

*"What is it Ron? Can't you see I'm busy?" Ginny snapped.*

*"You'll watch your tone Gin, who do you think you're talking to?" Ron snapped back.*

*"A brother who can't mind his own bloody business." Ginny replied.*

*"You were snogging my roommate! I think that's my business." Ron retorted.*

*"Who I kiss or who I don't is none of your concern." Ginny hissed.*

*"You're my baby sister! Of course it's my concern." Ron stated hotly.*

*"I'm fifteen Ron! Just because no one wants to kiss YOU doesn't mean I'm not old enough to." Ginny struggled to keep her voice low, eyes sparkling with anger.*

*Ron stopped short. Hurt by her implication, but refusing to show it.*

*"As your brother it's my duty to make sure you're okay! Going around and snogging Dean and who knows who else is not my definition of okay!"*

*"Some brother. Were you twiddling your thumb when Harry was fighting a basilisk to save me? And exactly who were you protecting at the Ministry last year?" Ginny accused.*

*Ron took a step back, speechless and hurt. Ginny too looked stunned by her own words, but she was still more angry than regretful.*

*"You can tell me what to do when you become something other than a useless, rude, insufferable git!" Ginny snapped.*

*His Ginny... no. Ginny turned around and stomped away.*

---

*Harry and Ginny's lips locked in a passionate kiss. They embraced and Ron met Harry's eyes over her shoulder.*

*'Is this okay?' Was the silent question.*

*Ron shrugged, showing that it was. Harry's eyes shined with gratitude from across the room as his attention drifted back to Ginny. There was some anger there, but not for Harry. He knew Harry would watch and protect his sister. The anger was for Ginny... no... it was more like hurt. She didn't want anything to do with him anymore.*

*She'd been pulling away from him more and more with each year and now they never talked anymore. When they went home for the holidays they only talked to each other when in a group of people. Never alone like they use to. And he knew why.*

*He'd failed her as an older brother. He wasn't capable of doing anything for her, but get in her way when she wanted to kiss someone. He'd been blocked off from going to her rescue in the chamber by a rock slide and when she got hurt in the ministry last year he'd been already cursed by one of the death eaters there. Harry rescued her from the chamber and almost died for her. It was Harry who helped her in the ministry during the battle. She was right. He was a useless, rude, insufferable git. He was worthless.*

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Outside of the hospital rain splattered to the ground softly. Ron walked down the street, not paying the least bit of attention to where he was going, while staring resolutely at the ground. He wasn't sure how long he simply walked, but at some point he ended up on the other sides of town in clothes that were soaked all the way through. He wasn't sure if the ache in his feet was from the infection or simply a side effect of walking several miles in wet socks. Either way he sat

down on a cement bench and listened to the plopping noise of raindrops hitting ground.

Steadily the sound got harsher and louder as the sprinkling turned into a thick curtain of falling water. Ron finally raised his eyes from the ground to stare at the dark sky above. Even when rain drops fell into the whites of his eyes he did not blink. Thunder boomed with such force that his bones were jarred, but still he paid no attention. The streets were deserted of inhabitants, all having fled from the rain, and shops were closing up early for the day. It was refreshing in a way. The cold water seemed to numb his body to the ache that lay there while he thought.

Out of the many thoughts that flew through his mind one kept repeating itself. He was going to be a complete burden on his family and friends. So much planning had become useless. How was he going to be able to protect Harry from reporters if he was sick and lying in bed all the time? How was he going to help his family with finances if he was putting them in debt with medical bills? How could he ask Hermione out on a date if he was just going to be retching and fainting on her? How could he finally get everyone nice Christmas and birthday presents when he wouldn't be able to work? How could he live with Harry and Hermione if he wouldn't be able to help pay for the apartment?

The answer was simple. He couldn't. If he told them he would become nothing but a useless, worthless, pathetic burden on all of them. If he didn't go through with the treatment he was going to be dead in three or so months. He didn't want to die. Fear and shame gripped a hold of him and refused to let go. What would happen if he told them?

His parents would want him to live with them. They would insist on helping him pay the medical bills since he didn't even have a job yet. They would become dirt poor again. His mum wouldn't be able to spoil her daughter like she'd wanted to. Ginny and the others would pity him and feel sorry for their parents for having to take care of 'ickle Ronniekins.' Nights of being sick would keep them awake and

holidays would be less enjoyable because of money strain and *him*. Harry and Hermione would let those filthy journalists walk right over them. They would leave him behind and become Aurors without him.

And what if he died despite the treatment? They'd have to slowly watch him die. He'd slowly be less and less able to take care of himself. There was a sixty percent chance he was going to die even with the treatment. So he was going to not only put them through that, but leave them with a large debt?

What if... what if he didn't get the treatment? He couldn't hide how sick he was from them. Every day the pain was getting worse. He nearly blacked out in the hall the other night. His hands constantly had a tremor to them now. So they would all notice... but he would be dead a lot faster than the slowness of the treatment. They wouldn't be left with a debt. They could simply move on with their lives.

What if... what if... what if he simply got it over with and killed himself?

Ron retched onto the ground in front of him.

---

Ron stood outside the door of the Burrow for nearly half an hour before mustering the courage to enter. He felt an irrational fear that they would know what happened simply by looking at him. The opposite was much truer. Walking into the house he found everyone seated around the table eating dinner and making idle chit chat about things he didn't know or care about. It was oddly creepier than if they had known.

"Oh! My dear boy you're soaked to the bone." His mum hollered from her seat.

Everyone turned toward him as Mrs. Weasley bustled over to Ron and muttered a spell. Instantly dry, Ron smiled gratefully at his mum, and silently took a seat beside Hermione.

"So where'd you get off to all day? It's been raining for the better part of it." Charlie asked from across from him.

Ron shrugged.

"Actually I needed to meet someone this morning. A retired Auror who agreed to tell me more about the job I'm about to sign up for." Ron muttered.

"Why didn't you tell us Ron! Didn't you think that me and Harry could have found something useful in talking to them as well?" Hermione demanded in irritation.

"Believe me Hermione I don't think you two need any advise what so ever." Ron replied.

Hermione blushed at the compliment. Charlie gave a full bellied laugh as he took a large bite of a croissant. It was almost embarrassingly easy to lie to them. Ron looked around at each individual person before stopping on Ginny. Her clothes were nicer than the rest of them. She was wearing a blue blouse with white capris. Their mum had just taken her shopping the other day.

Ron cringed when his eyes fell on his mum. She still wore the same old clothes as before the war. They were worn and coming apart at the seams. Molly Weasley had always wanted a little girl to spoil and talk to. His brothers told him that the witch watching his growth had made a mistake and told his mother that he was going to be a girl. Fred and George told him several times when they were children that their mum had cried when a few months later she was told he was a boy.

*'Least loved by the mother who craved a daughter.'* Ron shook his head fiercely to rid himself of *its* voice. The piece of Voldemort's soul that had whispered to him for several months before he destroyed it still echoed in his mind sometimes. And he knew why. *'I have seen your heart Ronald Weasley... and it is mine.'* What it had to say about his feelings and thoughts were still true. He was still Harry and

Hermione's shadow. He was still the least liked in the family. Still the disappointment.

A wave of pain rushed through his body. Ron clenched his teeth tightly and pulled his hands under the table and gripped his pants in an effort to not jerk and groan with the pain. As the acute pain left and only the regular pain stayed Ron picked up his fork and continued eating.

Ron ate slowly as he tried to think of the best course of action, but it wasn't until his eyes fell on Percy that an idea started to form. What if he moved out and got an easy, nonphysical job? He could make the payments and go to treatment without them even knowing. Ron scooped up a large bit of mash potatoes and chewed thoughtfully.

The only problem was that Harry and Hermione at least would want to visit him even if he disappointed them by not becoming an Auror. They would see he was sick and want to help which would completely ruin the whole reason for moving out. But what if he pulled a Percy? What if he did something that caused them not to want to talk or visit?

It was a scary thought. Not communicating with any of them for two years. Could he even do something like that? Percy had, but Percy was a natural loner. Ron didn't do good on his own. He loved arguing with Hermione and goofing off with Harry. He loved the feel of being with people even when they were ignoring him. Charlie suddenly stood up from the table and stretched his arms above his head.

"That was a delicious meal as usual mum." Charlie announced.

Soon after Bill, Fleur, George and Ginny left as well. Molly, always the last to sit down yet first to finish, was already moving about the room cleaning up. When Hermione finished she traced her hand along the back of his shoulders and bent down to give him a peck on the cheek. Ron smiled at her as she followed Ginny's path back up the stairs to help her with her summer homework. Poor Gin was in for quite the night it seemed.

"So what's up?" Harry asked as he scooped the last of his food into his mouth and turned toward Ron. Percy and Arthur, always slow to eat, were too absorbed in their own conversation to pay attention to the two.

"Not much." Ron replied casually.

Harry snorted before picking up his glass of water and taking a sip.

"Something's always up when you don't vacuum your food up as soon as you sit down." Harry pointed out.

"I'm just exhausted. Didn't get much sleep last night." Ron said with a wink.

Harry frowned at him, but nodded.

"Sorry about that." Harry spoke quietly.

Ron patted Harry on the shoulder and shook his head with a grin on his face.

"I'm not blaming you Harry, I'm just telling you why. I'm not gonna di... not gonna... it's not a big deal at all mate. Don't worry about it." Ron stumbled through, harshly brought back to what he'd been thinking about before. *'Not gonna die from a little lack of sleep.'*

If Harry noticed his strange blunder he didn't say anything about it.

"What you did on the mission for Hermione... it was brilliant mate. Think you can give me some pointers?" Harry asked.

Ron chuckled humorlessly.

"I doubt I could ever do a repeat performance." Ron told him.

"Right..." Harry said sarcastically.

"I'm serious Harry." Ron said.

"Of course you are." Harry drawled. "Just accept that you performed a high level technic before either me or Hermione and bask in it instead of self-deprecating yourself."

Ron shook his head, but dropped the subject.

"Harry..." Ron trailed off, not even sure of what to say. Harry looked at him expectantly. "What if... I mean. What if I didn't... go with you and Hermione... to Auror training?" Ron asked quietly.

Harry sat up straighter, staring at Ron with wide eyes, and a frown deepening his cheeks.

"Why wouldn't you be going? It's your dream isn't it?" Harry asked.

Ron grasped his hands, twisting and rubbing them to get the ache to go away a little.

"Well... yes it is, but..." Ron said nervously. He avoided looking at Harry whose eyes were intent and focused. Why did he have to say anything? Harry wouldn't just let this go.

"Don't tell me you think you can't do it! Bloody hell Ron you've been doing nothing but fighting death eaters this past year." Harry said in exasperation.

"No... no it's not that." Ron said hurriedly.

"Then what?" Harry asked.

"I... I..." Ron stumbled. Then an idea struck him. "It's just... I got an offer for a different kind of Auror training by Dumbledore before he died. I wasn't going to do it, but... the head of the office sent me some more info about it and... I think I could really help you and Hermione if I took the training."

Harry grinned at him.



"That's great! Why didn't you tell me about this sooner? This is a really great honor Ron! Why wouldn't you take the training?" Harry asked in excitement.

Ron twisted his hands together harder. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before opening them. Harry was looking at him worriedly now, not liking his behavior in the least.

"It's..." Ron choked. "It's in Australia."

Harry stiffened, but he still tried to keep his smile in place. The happiness in his bright green eyes had seeped out though and Ron felt a pang of guilt seep through him. Was this better or worse than telling him the truth?

"Oh..." Harry said uncertainly. "Well I think you should take the opportunity! You've earned it Ron."

Silent words floated between them though. He could feel it like an icy wind swirling around him on a winter's eve. Harry wasn't angry with him, if it was that Ron thought he could deal with it. No, Harry was unsure and weary. Every time those journalist or photographers came around it was he who protected his overly polite companions. Ron was the one who dragged them off to do things when Harry and Hermione got overly stressed.

Harry didn't know how to handle Hermione when she overanalyzed things or when her ego got the best of her. Harry didn't know how to tell Hermione no when she was being too much or had gone too far in something. That had been and always would be Ron's job. Hermione was the serious one, the one who could get Harry to open up about things, but Ron was the one who could get Harry to lighten up or to admit he needed help.

Harry was the person who got them started. Hermione was the one that kept them on track. Ron was the balancer, the person who kept them stable, reminded them that they were only human and got them

what they needed. Harry would be left with Hermione without him, just like when he abandoned them during the Hocrux hunt.

It wasn't a betrayal to Harry and Hermione for Ron to leave them after their many years of planning. If it was just that they would be fine and happy for Ron. The betrayal came from the fact that they were all still healing from the war and needed each other. The opportunity was great, but simply not worth it. It was the reason why Ron had declined in the first place.

Ron wanted desperately to explain. He wanted to tell Harry that he was lying and that he would never willingly leave them. He wanted to tell Harry he was really sick, dying, and didn't have a choice but to leave. He wanted to explain that if he stayed Harry and Hermione would be constantly stressed and he wouldn't be able to help them because he would be the stresser.

But Ron wasn't weak willed. He wouldn't let Harry and Hermione have to deal with him along with everything else in their lives. He wouldn't let his family fall back into poverty because of medical bills. He wouldn't keep his family up all night taking care of him or let them see him sick. He would leave and find a way to take care of himself. He'd pay the bills himself and go to the hospital for treatment.

"Thanks Harry." Ron said quietly. The words were empty of any true meaning though. Harry quickly nodded and left the room. It was then that he noticed Percy and his mum and dad were also long gone. Ron pulled out a vial and swirled the liquid inside for several minutes. When another wave of pain came crashing up his spine and through his chest Ron's eyes tightened shut. His breath felt trapped inside his lungs as the pain caused his back to arch. As it subsided Ron opened the vial and chugged it in one go.

Relief flooding though him almost immediately. Even the constant ache seemed to lesson some under its influence. Ron stood up and started heading towards his bedroom with the full intentions of going to bed. Ron slipped the vial into his pocket, but paused at the stairwell when he heard George's voice.

"... be just fine dad." George whispered.

"Why don't you just wait until tomorrow to go back to the apartment son. It's better for you here right now where we can all be here for you." His father insisted.

"Lee's coming bright and early tomorrow morning. We're gonna try out a new product of our.... of mine." George explained. "I'll be fine."

The sound of cloth sliding against cloth sounded as George pulled on his rain coat and hugged their father. Ron heard his dad sigh and open the door for George. The click of the door closing sounded through the hall as his father's footsteps pattered back into the living room.

When Ron made it up to his bedroom he was relieved to find Harry not yet inside. The brunette was probably with his sister or Hermione. Too tired to bother getting into his pajamas Ron was out by time his head hit the pillow.

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Ginny was glaring holes into the side of Ron's head. He grimaced. Hermione just kept shooting Ron disappointed looks. Harry didn't know which was worse. He'd briefly mentioned Ron's idea to the two girls last night and been surprised at their attitudes concerning it. Ron seemed to be doing a brilliant job of completely ignoring them altogether. His red headed best friend appeared unaffected by their behavior, and if anything, expected it.

Harry wasn't quite sure how he felt about it all. On the one hand he was irritated with the two girls for treating Ron this way for simply thinking about taking an offer that would be an amazing opportunity for him. On the other he desperately wanted Ron to say no because he knew that without him the upcoming year would be horrible. Thus he silently egged the two girls on in his head. He condemned that part of him that wanted his best friend to stay, but that did little to stop that part of him from existing.

The treatment went on all day and much to Harry's dismay Ron became slowly more and more distant from all three of them. By the end of the day he locked himself up in his room and only came down for dinner. Even then though he ate quickly and left again. Hermione's disappointed looks turned to concerned glances, but Ginny's anger only seemed to increase.

The next day Ron was gone altogether before anyone woke up. He said nothing to anyone, simply disappeared. Molly went about the house in a fretful manner while Charlie scowled at Ron's empty seat during breakfast that morning. Harry would be lying to himself if he hadn't admitted he was worried.

When lunch time came around Harry and Hermione went to meet up with George at their usual café. At George's questioning look Harry could only shrug. The lunch went about normally, but it became slightly awkward when George kept slipping up and saying 'our' instead of 'mine.' Harry tried to smooth it over by telling him it would take time to heal, but it seemed that it was the wrong thing to say. George became closed off and dismal for the duration of the lunch and Hermione and him left feeling less than successful.

What was worse was that the journalists were back. They dogged Hermione and Harry the entire way back to the Burrow and derailed their plans to go check out the latest information concerning the leftover death eaters at Grimmauld place where Kingsley left them 'up-to-date' packets. They practically collapsed into the living room when they got back to the Burrow.

It was during dinner time that night when Harry realized that Ginny had given her own up-to-date packet to Charlie and Bill. When Ron finally came home and sat down for dinner the two of them treated Ron just as coldly as Ginny had been treating him. Harry squirmed in his seat beside Ron with the knowledge that he was the one that started this.

"Harry, can you hand me the mash potatoes?" Ron muttered.

Harry did so and tried to smile reassuringly at Ron, but Ron was avoiding looking at him.

"So where did you go today Ron? You were gone by time we woke up." Harry asked, trying to start a conversation.

"I was getting more information about the strategy training." Ron answered boldly.

Harry cringed and looked toward Ron's siblings. Bill was frowning at Ron disapprovingly while Charlie's eyes were hard with anger. Ginny had stopped eating and was glaring. Hermione too had stopped eating and was peering between the siblings uneasily.

"Ah... and... what did you find out." Harry asked in a strained voice.

At that moment the door opened showing Percy and Arthur were home. They came in together loudly discussing something or other before noticing the tense air in the room. They paused before sitting down and looking around curiously.

"They want me to head out in two weeks. So that means I'll be leaving the day after your birthday." Ron answered.

Harry stiffened, but forced a smile on his face. It was too soon.

"Oh... so you decided to go?" Harry asked.

"Yes. I'm going." Ron answered and this time he looked up and stared straight into his sibling's faces.

"What's this about?" Arthur asked.

Ginny glared venomously at her brother before turning to her father.

"Ron has decided that he's going to abandon Harry and Hermione again... to go to some high up strategy specialist Auror training." Ginny hissed.

"Well I'm just so good at abandoning people I thought I'd give it another go. It really has nothing to do with what I can do for Harry and Hermione once I finish training at all!" Ron snapped.

Harry flinched as Ron stood up and picked up his plate of food. Going to the other side of the kitchen the red head put up his barely touched food before going up to his bedroom. Harry turned back to the table and shook his head disapprovingly toward Ginny. Hermione too looked angrily at her. Ginny huffed and shoved a bite of food into her mouth.

"That was uncalled for Gin." Bill said softly.

Arthur gave his daughter a disappointed frown before heading up to Ron's bedroom. Percy quietly ate his food from his corner of the table, slightly pale, and avoiding everyone's eyes. Harry felt bad for the young man. The argument between Ron and his siblings probably reminded him too much of his mistakes.

Molly Weasley came bustling into the room, having been gathering items from the garden, before tutting unhappily at the silent and solemn faces in the room.

"Now what is this hm? Georgie is going to be here any minute and I don't want any of you upsetting him with your shenanigans with Ronnie. So shape up!" Molly snapped.

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*" You want to receive your treatment in Australia? Well yes, we do have a very renowned medical facility there but... seeing as your condition is so severe we highly suggest living with relatives or friends. Making a move now is... well Mr. Weasley it's simply suicidal. You won't be able to take care of yourself in a few months' time unless you plan on living in the hospital?"*

*" No, I'll be living by myself." He answered quietly.*

*" Suicidal. Your condition is too precarious! The treatment at this point only has a forty percent chance of survival and you want to face that alone? In a new place where you know no one? Don't be ridiculous young man!"*

*" I don't want them to know about any of this at all. They're devastated by the war and they've only just managed to get a little money. I don't want them involved." Ron whispered as he rubbed his arms.*

*" Foolishness, but understandable and courageous foolishness. Your intentions are good, but you're only hurting your family in the long run. Do you honestly believe that they would be happy to know you hid this from them? They'll want to help."*

*" They would all be willing to give up their daily lives to help me, but that's just it. I don't want them to see me in pain and struggling from day to day. I don't want to keep them up or have them cooking and looking after me. I don't want to be a burden on them after everything they've done for me." Ron tried to explain.*

*The older man looked at him with deep seeded sadness.*

*" I can not force you to tell them Mr. Weasley, seeing as you're eighteen, but I want you to know that I am highly against this. Family is often the most defining feature for those who manage to survive harsh treatments." Dr. Oort told him firmly.*

*" I... get that. But I still want to perform the treatment in Australia."*

*" Then your treatment will begin at the start of next month. That will give you two weeks to make any definite decisions."*

Ron turned over to face the wall as Harry entered the room and closed his eyes as the pain medication began its work. All his tense muscles relaxed as the ache faded a bit. He didn't really care that the side effects made him drowsy and irritable as long as it made him feel a little better.

He heard Harry sit on the bed beside him and his best friend's eyes gazing at him. For a moment it seemed that Harry was going to say something, but then the boy simply got up and left the room. Ron let out a sigh of relief before giving into the drowsiness. The darkness not only momentarily took the pain away, but also stole the voice and looks of his siblings.



# Departure Ch4

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

**Last new chapter until after Exams. Exams end December 9 so expect the next one on Saturday December 16 because I'm going to my Mom's for a week and will be driving most of that weekend.**

"It was, he thought, the difference between being dragged into the arena to face a battle to the death and walking into the arena with your head held high. Some people, perhaps, would say that there was little to choose between the two ways, but Dumbledore knew and so did Harry now- that there was all the difference in the world."

**J.K. Rowling**

*Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince, 2005*

Chapter 4: Departure

*When he arrived tattered and splinched on Bill's doorstep in the middle of the night Ron refused to meet his oldest brother's eyes or answer his questions. Slightly freaked out by Ron's unresponsive behavior he sat with him on the couch for the night and into the early morning. When Ron finally whispered to him what he'd done Bill was filled with disappointment in his youngest brother.*

*He didn't say anything to him, but he knew Ron was aware of how he felt at that moment. Ronnie brought his knees up to his chest and leaned his head against the arm of the couch. Bill ignored the torn pants and dark circles under his eyes in favor of making tea in the kitchen to calm his nerves. His little brother stayed where he was at and eventually drifted off to sleep.*

*When Bill woke up in the morning it was to an empty couch and a missing supply bag. Ron was gone. Bill ran a hand through his hair*

*and then spent the majority of the morning pacing back and forth across his living room. When Fleur woke up they exchanged worried looks before Fleur made a particularly large breakfast with slightly raw ham and sausage.*

*" If you are going to worry zo much thenz you must 'ave a full zomach." Fleur announced. "E'll be fine Beel. 'E es strong like 'is brother ans 'is best frien'." She added quietly.*

*Ron came back much later that day with a haggard, dejected expression on his face. Fleur fussed over him and made them both dinner though Ron barely ate any of it. Worst of all he still wouldn't look Bill in the eyes. Reluctant to forgive him for his misdeed so soon, but unwilling to mistreat him, Bill showed Ron one of the guest rooms to stay in for the moment.*

*The next morning Ron was gone again. When he didn't come home that night Bill listened to a news broadcast on the radio conducted by Fred, George and Lee to calm his nerves. The comforting voice of his twin brothers reminded him that everyone was still 'okay.' No one in their family had been hunted down and killed.*

*' Yet.' His mind whispered to him. 'There's nine of you after all. Twelve if you count Fleur, Harry and Hermione... which you do. How long then until one of them dies? And your little brother is in the most dangerous position of all.'*

*Bill took a large gulp of tea and closed his eyes. An image of a small Ron holding up a large toad and covered in mud came to mind and he smiled in nostalgia. They just kept coming after that. Charlie sneaking into his room one night to tell him what Hagrid had told him about dragons. Percy proudly announcing he'd finished all his Hogwarts summer homework the first week home for break. Fred coming to him one day to ask him how to handle a boner... His lips twitched at that one. A three year old George crying because Fred told him he was mum's favorite and George thought he'd done something wrong to make him 'not the favorite.' A seven year old Ginny trying to 'take' a sleeping Ron to bed.*

*Ron didn't come home for two straight days. Bill barely slept and paced through the living room like a cornered animal. In the early morning hours of the third day Ron came through the door of Shell cottage. Ron stood in the doorway covered from head to toe in mud. He pulled out his wand and pointed it at himself whispering 'scourgio' under his breath. Now cleaned off Ron walked right passed him and headed to the bathroom. Bill also didn't say a word.*

*Twenty minutes passed before Ron reemerged from the bathroom and wearily collapsed into the seat farthest away from Bill with his head in his hands. His bloody digits were poorly bandaged and his hands shook with a strong tremor. Ron didn't attempt to get any tea or even move, seemingly content to just sit there.*

*' It's all fine and dandy to act like your better than him, but... he's faced more death eaters and dark creatures than you and Charlie together. You're living in a nice warm home while he's practically been on the streets and who knows where all these months... You can tell he's tired and worn and been through hell. He instantly regretted his decision to leave and you condemn him when you don't even know what he's been through... hell, he didn't even tell you why he left.'*

*Bill stood up silently and made a large cup of steaming tea. Honey and sugar were added, too sweet for his tastes, before setting it down in front of his little brother. Ron peered at the cup over his fingers with surprise. He gingerly reached down and picked it up. Taking a small sip from the steaming mug Ron's entire tense frame relaxed the slightest bit.*

*"Thank you." Ron whispered tiredly, still avoiding looking at him directly.*

*Bill stood there for a long moment. Too long. Ron's frame lost any relaxed demeanor it had when Bill first put the cup down. The moment ruined by his own blunder, Bill attempted to shrug nonchalantly, but came off more as frigid.*

*"No problem." Bill told him.*

*When Ron disappeared a week and a half later and did not return Fleur kept a close eye on him. When he got too quiet she would wrap her arms around him and simply hold him until he was ready for her to let him go.*

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In two weeks' time he'd become the official focus point of all his siblings' anger. The fact that he was leaving for 'strategy training' and the irritability the medicine caused in him led to many confrontations with the more volatile of his siblings. Which because of the commotion these confrontations caused resulted in the silent anger radiating from those who were less vocal.

Hermione was less than thrilled with him as was his mother. Harry had taken the 'let's ignore what's happening' approach while his father had decided that they were all being overly dramatic. Ron had been going to sleep every night after dinner and waking up late, which normally would have caused the others' concern, but due to recent events they welcomed it.

The morning of Harry Potter's eighteenth birthday Ron cursed at himself in front of the mirror. His hands were trembling harshly with pain, but he promised himself that he wouldn't take any of the pain reliever medicine today so that he would be awake and in a better mood for Harry's whole birthday. Ron would just have to shove them in his pockets and pray that no one asked him to do much wand work or handshaking. It had gotten steadily harder to hide his pain from his numerous family members. It seemed as if the moment he thought he was alone and could relax another one would pop up out of nowhere and he'd nearly jump out of his skin in fright.

The baby snow owl he'd picked up a couple days ago was in the attic where he checked on the little thing hourly. And he'd already decided on a name. Normally when you give someone a pet they're allowed to name it, but Ron had a feeling that Harry would love the

name. He made a tag with the name on it and placed it in between the small bars of the cage.

July 31st turned out to be a rather blustery day. After Ron retrieved the little owl he gave it breakfast and brought it downstairs to place on the table where Harry's other presents were. They decided that present opening would be best for when Harry first woke up so that the little owl wouldn't have to stay under the cover for long. The moment he set it on the table, and noticed the only other person in the room, Ron turned around to leave as fast as possible.

"You're nothing but a selfish coward. You know that right?" Ginny demanded casually as she flipped through the daily prophet.

Ron ignored her altogether and walked into the garden. Wind that he'd noticed hitting the window now blew against his face. He breathed in the fresh air as he walked forward into the expansive yard and soaked in the view. Ron heard the sound of the backdoor opening and the louder than strictly naturally sounds of his little sisters footsteps. She'd always done that. Walked harder to make herself heard to be more like the boys.

Long, red hair fluttered in the strong wind as its owner stepped around him to stand two feet in front of him. Forced to stop abruptly so as not to walk straight into her Ron inwardly wilted in weariness. Now that he wasn't taking the pain reliever he wasn't irritated enough to want to fight back against her. The pain was radiating in his hands, up his arms, and through his chest. He hadn't realized how bad he hurt until he had medicine to relieve it some. He could only be thankful that the pain didn't reach his legs today so he could walk easily.

"What exactly is wrong with you?" Ginny snarled. "Can't handle the propaganda? Harry's been handling it for years so grow a fucking back bone!"

"Gin... not today." Ron said firmly.

"Today's your last day here. There won't be any other days. Besides Harry's not even awake yet. He was up all night talking to ME about how he wasn't sure he would be able to make it through Auror training without YOU." Ginny snarled.

Ron felt a wave of guilt, but knew that it didn't matter because whether he stayed or left he wouldn't be able to be there for Harry. He wouldn't be able to be there for Hermione or do anything that a boyfriend should. He'd end up making everything worse for Harry and Hermione by staying. It was that fact that kept him stubbornly set on his path to leave. He just had to keep reminding himself that no one else knew those reasons. It made what they said about him hurt a little less.

"Well then if it was a conversation between *you* and *him* why don't you *keep* it that way! Besides Harry's amazing. I'm sure he'll be fine at Auror training. He's just nervous." Ron said.

"You're impossible!" Ginny hissed.

"And you're a little twit that's too big for your breeches." Ron replied.

Ginny's face became red, but Ron wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment.

"Bloody arse!" Ginny whispered before turning around and stomping back into the house.

The moment the door closed behind her Ron bent over double and his knees gave out beneath him. Intense pain had flared up in his back making it impossible to stay on his feet. Ron put his hand in his mouth and bit down to keep from screaming. His entire body was trembling by the sudden onslaught tearing through him.

The taste of copper filled his mouth as he bit down harder to keep the sob in his throat from escaping. Blood dripped onto the grass beneath him. His labored breathing seemed to echo its plopping noise onto the grass. Distantly he heard the sounds of people

moving about the house and knew if he didn't move soon someone was going to find him.

Continuing to bite down on his hand Ron stumbled to his feet and further away from the house. Behind the shed Ron leaned against the metal sheet and slid down its wall. For several long minute's acid like pain crawled down his spine making his body jerk and tense. When they finally subsided Ron let out a single pained moan through his hand.

Pulling his hand out of his mouth Ron felt blood drip down his chin as he examined the bite wound. He grimaced. It was deep, he probably only barely missed the bone. Looking down at himself he noticed his shirt had a thick trail of blood that even the orange and red cloth couldn't hide.

A loud bang sounded as Ron's head thudded back against the shed in frustration. Just one day. All he had was one day left and this happens. Ron spit out the remaining blood in his mouth and pulled his shirt over his head. Wiping his mouth and chin with the cloth he then wrapped it around his hand to cover the wound, but loose enough that it just looked like he was carrying it.

Ron's muscles tensed unpleasantly as he forced himself to stand. Trembling, but determined Ron made his way back to the house and snuck upstairs where Harry still slept, the boy who lived completely unaware of things to come.

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"Happy Birthday Harry!" A chorus of voices cried.

Harry Potter nearly jumped out of his skin in freight as his still blurry eyes took in the sight of a group of redheaded people yelling at him. Shoving his glasses on his face a table filled with presents and a birthday cake presented itself to him with his pseudo family grinning at him from across the room. From across the room Teddy squealed excitedly in Mrs. Weasley's arms. Harry smiled fondly at the baby

whose hair changed from bright pink to violet as Arthur took him into his arms and lifted him up.

"Wow." Harry announced with a grin on his face. George rolled his eyes and pulled Harry forward into a one handed hug.

"That's our Harry! All sophisticated and stuff." George called out. Laughter and praises were called out as Harry found himself being shoved into the head seat. Someone, Charlie maybe, shoved a present into his hands. Harry checked the tag, noticing it was from Bill and Fleur, before opening the present. A small, thin, golden object sat in the palm of his hands.

"A Probity Probe?" Harry asked as he turned it around in his hands.

"Thought since you were going into the Auror business it would be useful." Bill answered.

"Thanks. It will definitely come in use." Harry told him happily.

Ginny had given him brand new goggles for quidditch with charms in place to see in the dark. Molly and Arthur gave him dishware for their new apartment while the ever thoughtful Percy gave him towels. Charlie gave him a small orb attached to a chain that the dragon watcher called 'a Aura orb for the Auror.' George punched him in the shoulder for the lame joke. Apparently it changed color according to his mood.

Hermione set her present down with a twinkle in her eyes. Ron too seemed intent on seeing the present opened. He gave them a knowing look to which they simply grinned back at him. Opening it up Harry couldn't contain the grin that split his face. 'A Guide to Transfiguring and Repairing Glasses.' When several of the other Weasley's gave them questioning looks the three just snickered.

When Harry dug into the bag that was George's present he found himself looking at a strange, clear and long rock like thing he was



surprised to find it was... squishy. George grinned at the whole family like Harry had won a fabulous prize.

"That my dear, adorable family, is my newest invention! It's an improved version of the secrecy sensor the ministry uses. If you lie it turns red, the truth then it turns green, and if you try twisting the truth it turns a rather nasty shade of gray! But that's not all folks! If you're hiding a secret it changes color according to what kind of secret! Seven different shades of secrets! That's what the advertisements going to be anyway..." George muttered to himself.

Harry laughed, but Hermione seemed very upset about the announcement. Her arms were folded in front of her and she had 'that look' on her face. Harry snickered harder as he saw Ron take several steps back from both George and Hermione.

"Do you have any idea how irresponsible that type of an invention is? Just imagine the havoc that such power could cause in the wrong hands!" Hermione lectured furiously.

"I know." George said with a solemn voice. "People won't be able to cheat on girlfriends or boyfriends anymore. The horror of it all! And no more lying about homework! It will be terrible!"

Bill gaffald from across the table. Fleur too had a grin on her face, but like everything else about her it managed to look more like a beautiful smile than a naturally grin. Harry listened to them all joke around and tease each other in contentment.

"There's more Harry." George announced, raising his voice above the others.

Surprised Harry dug deeper into the bag and pulled out several items, new and old, from the joke shop including their very useful shield cloaks and gloves. After thanking George profusely for the array of gifts the last one was placed in front of him. Ron smiled at him and gave him an encouraging nod.

It was shaped like a cage. Instantly Hedwig entered his mind and Harry gave a sad smile towards Ron. Ron just returned it and for the first time Harry noticed that Ron was wearing his quidditch gloves. He gave Ron a questioning look, but when all he got was a shrug in answer Harry turned back to the cage. Pulling the cloth off of it Harry nearly choked.

'Dear Harry, my name is Dobby and though I can't replace either of your small friends I hope I can still be a part of your future.' The baby bird hooted at the light that filtered through its cage and gave Harry an indignant huff. The little owl tilted its head to the side as it scrutinized him before frantically flapping its little wings to regain its balance as it nearly fell off his perch.

"Thanks Ron." Harry choked.

"Well... I don't think he'll be able to carry mail for a few months yet so you'll have to find regular owls for a bit." Ron told him.

Harry simply nodded as he watched the baby owl blink up at him.

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Later that day Harry walked into Ron's room to find his friend packing with the fingerless red and black gloves known to the Gryffindors on his hands. The gloves brought to attention something he hadn't noticed before though. Ron's hands were trembling. His mind instantly went back to the café incident a few weeks ago and with a guilty start he realized he hadn't been looking out for it like he promised himself he would.

Harry sat on the bed and gripped Ron's right hand. The redhead jerked in surprise at the unexpected contact. Light blue eyes met bright accusing green.

"Why are your hands shaking Ron?" Harry demanded.

"Must be dehydrated." Ron said with a shrug.

"I've seen you drink at least four cups of tea today alone. Try again." Harry stated calmly.

Ron ripped his hand away from Harry's and gingerly rubbed it while averting his eyes from his.

"It's not that bad. It doesn't happen very often." Ron told him.

"Often enough... how long has this been going on?" Harry questioned.

He didn't like how Ron refused to meet his eyes.

"Not long." Ron said softly.

"You're a terrible liar Ron, always have been." Harry accused wearily.

"Just... don't worry about it Harry. It's not a big deal. It's a little hard to use my wand sometimes, but it doesn't really bother me." Ron said.

"God damn it Ron... your supposed to tell me and Hermione things like this!" Harry exclaimed in exasperation.

Ron just shrugged as he continued to pack.

"You should see a medical witch or wizard." Harry suggested.

Ron shook his head.

"Already did. Nothing they can do." Ron told him.

"When did...? Never mind. Could they at least tell you what's causing it?" Harry asked.

Ron paused with one of their old text books in his hand. He turned to Harry and sighed before sitting on the bed beside his best friend. Letting the textbook fall to the floor Ron rubbed his gloved hands roughly while staring at the floor.

"It's... a long term side effect from a mix of the specific curses and jinxes I was hit with." Ron said slowly. "Nothing any of Hermione's research could fix or your wonder boy skill can do. It's a consequence that can't simply be made to go away. I'll deal with it Harry. I've been dealing with it just fine."

Harry looked hard at Ron for a long while. When Ron still refused to look at him Harry sighed and spoke.

"You and Hermione stayed with me when Voldemort was trying to get into my mind. Every time my scar hurt you both were there for me. We want you to tell us about stuff like this even if we can't do anything about it because we care." Harry told Ron sternly, repeating Hermione's words from so long ago.

"Thanks." Ron whispered. The sound of a baby's cry filled the air. Harry stood up and left the room. A moment later the freshly turned eighteen year old walked in with a whimpering infant tightly clutching Harry's shirt.

"Here, give him to me." Ron demanded softly. Harry bit his lip, eyes watching Ron's shaking hands wearily. Ron noticed the look. "Don't worry. I promise he won't end up like the teacup at the café." Ron said jokingly.

Harry laughed and handed the reluctant infant to Ron. Ron gently cradled the tiny child, standing up and softly turning around while bumping the baby up and down. The baby stopped whimpering and looked up at Ron with big curious eyes as his hair turned from stormy gray to orange.

"How'd you know to do that?" Harry asked.

Ron continued gently raising the baby up and down as he turned to Harry.

"Well... Ginny got this doll one year for Christmas, obsessed with it she was, and Mum would always be giving off all these instructions

to her. Burping it and dressing it and all that. Since me and Ginny both tended to stay in the living room while Mum cleaned and cooked the house I always ended up stuck listening to their girl talk." Ron explained.

Harry snickered. Teddy peered over at Harry at the noise and held out his small hands in a wanting motion.

"Typical," Ron muttered with a roll of his eyes. "Even babies prefer you." It was meant as a joking gesture, but Harry didn't find it very funny. Harry guessed that Ron could tell he said the wrong thing because he grimaced. "Sorry mate. Didn't mean anything by it. Just a joke." Ron attempted to back track. "I'm just... gonna be quiet now." Ron said lamely.

Harry knew it did mean something though. *'Who could look at you, who would ever look at you, beside Harry Potter?'* He remembered the awful words of Voldemort's soul as it echoed every insecurity Ron had. Harry shrugged nonchalantly as he took Teddy into his arms, but he silently wondered if Ron would ever realize how much the people around him cared about him.

*'Look, it's always you who gets all the attention, you know it is. I know it's not your fault. I know you don't ask for it, but... well. You know Ron's got all those brother's to compete against at home and you're his best friend AND you're really famous. He's always shunted to one side when people see you, and he puts up with it, and he never mentions it, but I suppose that this is just one too many times.'* Hermione's voice whispered in his ear from years past.

Ron went back to packing silently as Harry attempted bumping Teddy up and down like Ron had. The babies giggles were interrupted by the sound of gagging, and before Harry could move the baby away, throw up fell down his front. Ron burst out laughing from his place in front of his enchanted back pack. The baby giggled again as he tried to grab a strand of black hair.

"Lovely."

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Saying goodbye, in Ron's opinion, sucked on a few different levels. His siblings, with the exception of Percy, were ignoring him and refusing to say goodbye. Percy had told him good luck before scurrying inside, not wanting to be on anyone bad side more than he already was. His mother had cried about her baby boy leaving too soon before being dragged outside by his dad who gave him a shrug of amusement.

It was the silent message underneath the eyes of his two closest friends that begged him to stay which really killed him inside though. Harry and Hermione had given him sincere and heart felt goodbyes. They wished him luck and hugged him, only reluctantly letting him go, before he shouldered his bag and apparated. It was another miles walk down the road to get into the actual grounds. People poured in from all sides to enter an extravagant and large castle encircled by an even larger green field.

Thankfully he already knew his way around. Despite the Port key center for international travel being heavily busy Ron made his way through the crowds easily. He'd now gone to Australia twice in search of a cheap apartment near the wizarding hospital. He found one about ten blocks away from the place in a small town heavily populated by wizards half cut off from the muggle world and the other half submerged in it. His father would love it.

Ron stepped up to a little pale man with a large pointed nose as he directed a group of preteens to a port key going to Scotland. A name tag sat on his black and blue vest that proclaimed 'Welcome! My name is Hues. How may I help you?' The man turned to him and smiled warmly.

"Ah... Mr. Weasley! Now we just need Miss. Sassily and Mr. Ruthe and we'll have a full port!" Mr. Hues exclaimed warmly. "It must be very exciting for you! Moving across the world to see such a magnificent place as Australia."

Ron smiled and nodded even as his stomach turned. He wouldn't be seeing much outside the hospital and the dingy little apartment he'd rented. Dr. Oort had laid out strict guide lines about what he'd be able to do once he started the treatment and traveling across the continent definitely wasn't one of them.

An old dark skinned man joined them soon after with a large duffle bag that seemed to be the cause of his hunch on his back. When Ron offered to take it for him, at least for the ride, the man grunted at him before turning away. Slightly affronted by the rude shove off both Ron and Mr. Hues sat in an awkward silence for nearly twenty minutes.

When a beautiful young woman came rushing in waving her hands out as she dragged a large suit case behind her Mr. Hues smiled warmly. As Ron peered at her he was surprised to find he had a hard time placing her origins. Her features didn't match someone from India yet she didn't look African either. Ron guessed she was either an extremely tan white person, hard to come by in Britain, or a light skinned black person. Her hair was black as midnight and while rough looking didn't seem as coarse as Lees or Deans.

Curiosity begged him to ask her, but politeness beat his curiosity with a stick to shut it up. He would not be like Hermione and ask an insanely rude question without thinking just because he wanted to know. The young woman panted with hands on knees in front of them as she came to a stop. Looking up and seeing the three males staring at her she gave an apologetic smile.

"Sorry lads. Me house elf Brens wouldn't let me go without several trays of home cooked food. He'll be joining me late in the week, but he acted as if we were never to see each other again." The young woman proclaimed with an eye roll. Her thick Irish accent immediately reminded him of Seamus. Mr. Hues clapped his hands together with a wide grin on his thin face.

"No worries my dear, no worries." Mr. Hues announced. The man pulled out a rope tied into a circle from his pocket. "Now that we're all

here we can go ahead and head out! Now just grab ahold of this on the count of three. One... Two... Three!"

Ron grabbed ahold of it briefly contemplating that the man could have given the young Miss. Sassily a minute. The jerk of the swirling motion ceased all thoughts as Ron simply focused on holding on. When the sound of Mr. Hues voice broke through the sickening ride Ron let go and tumbled ungracefully to the ground.

"Ah... me arse just broke." Miss. Sassily's voice sounded from beside him.

Ron groaned in agreement. He stumbled to his feet and scrunched his nose in disgruntlement at the sight of Mr. Hues standing with his hands folded behind his back with a grin on his face. The rude old man with the heavy bag on his back began hobbling down the hill and into town without a word.

"Old bugger." Ron muttered. Ron swung his backpack back over his shoulder and looked toward the Irish woman. She was still on the ground picking up knick knacks that had fallen out of her bag. She stuffed the last of her belongings in a pocket, a pair of underwear, with a red blush covering her cheeks. Ron bit his lip to stop himself from laughing as he offered the woman a hand. She looked up and grinned crookedly as she grabbed it.

"Don't think's we've been properly introduced now have we? Names Antea Sassily." Antea introduced.

"Ron Weasley." Ron told her. Mr. Hues waved goodbye to them both as he finished enchanting the Port King to go back. Ron and Antea watched him grab the ring and flicker out of existence. When they were alone Antea grinned up at him. .

"An agreeable lad ye are and yeese looks a sight like me brother to boot. Well he's a tad darker than ye, but why mess with specifics right? Since we're both new to this place want to catch dinner



together? I imagine it would be a tad less lonely for us both ai?" Antea asked.

"Sure." Ron asked, completely amused. Ron flinched as his chest began to flare up in pain, making his bag suddenly seem heavier. Antea started heading down the hill and for a moment Ron wondered if he should ask her if she would like him to take her bag, but as another wave of pain hit him he decided it probably wouldn't be the best idea.

As the two made their way into town Antea told him all about the brother he reminded her of. Her blunt and loud personality reminded him of Charlie, though he'd never heard his dragon keeper brother talk as much as this woman did. She was also a rather clumsy individual unlike his graceful brother. She kept her eyes more on her feet than the path ahead as if keeping an eye on them.

Ron grinned when she told him how her brother and his friends got horribly lost in a muggle town once and ended up in a school where they discovered a red metal thing that spit white stuff when they pressed the handle. As they entered the wizard only side of town and searched for a place to eat Antea gave a loud exclamation of relief.

The young witch pulled out her wand and levitated the bag behind her. As they continued looking Ron told her about Hermione's SPEW campaign for house elves and the disasters that were caused by it. The young woman laughed hard as they entered a seafood place. Ron rubbed his arms and rolled them as the ache increased a bit.

"This Hermione sounds like a grand lil' lass. She yours?" Antea asked.

Ron's ears turned red from embarrassment.

"Yeah, been together a little more than a year now, but we've been best friends since first year at Hogwarts." Ron told her.

"Yeah? Best friends with a girl all those years?" Antea asked, eyes shining with curiosity.

"Well... actually it was me, Hermione and Harry. I had two best friends." Ron explained. They sat down at a table near the back of the crowded restaurant and a woman came to greet them with a wide fake smile. Ordering butterbeers for the both of them Antea clicked her tongue at Ron in silent laughter.

"Still odd lad. Your lass have any female friends?" Antea asked.

"She didn't really get along too well with the girls at our school. 'Mione wasn't much into her looks and she was too much of a... well she didn't really get along well with a lot of people." Ron said honestly. He shrugged helplessly while Antea laughed, clutching her side and hiccupping.

"Your lass sounds like a spitfire. Keep her close Ron." Antea said seriously after a moment.

"Close as I can." Ron reassured her. "So why'd you travel this far anyways?"

"Ah... well me brothers in this special training program for Aurors. He'd be twenty years old now and has just moved from trainee to a full-fledged Auror. The thing is he decided to stay down here and I can't be haven that now. He's the only family I've got left and I won't be left behind. So I packed up all me things and kissed me life in Ireland goodbye to join him here." Antea announced. The waiter came back with their drinks in hand before quickly disappearing when Antea asked for a few more minutes to order.

"You just dropped everything and left for good?" Ron asked disbelievingly.

She swirled her drink absentminded before a disgruntled expression came about her.

"There's not a lot of people out there that enjoy a person whose as blunt as I. Bunch o cafflers. Like fer you to say a happy lie than face the truth o da matter. Well... even if I had friends I didn't keep 'em for long." Antea said with a sigh. "So no one to leave behind for me to miss."

"Ah... I see." Ron said, though he honestly didn't see at all.

Antea smiled at Ron and shook her head.

"No ye don't, but that's okay. So tell me what are ye doing all the way down here?" Antea asked. Ron grimaced, but didn't see much point in lying to this stranger. And since her brother was going to the very place he'd told his family he was going to there was a chance he would be seeing her around. He planned on at least asking if he could sit in on the lessons even if he wouldn't be able to participate soon.

"I'm here... for treatment for a magical infection at a hospital called Ruegrunt. I start tomorrow." Ron admitted reluctantly with a shrug. Antea's face fell.

"Ah... so not exactly here for pleasant reasons and not a soul ye know here either." Antea said sadly. The waiter came back to them then and they ordered their food with a solemn air. When he left again Antea wrinkled her nose in agitation before looking up at Ron. "You know... I got a transfer here to breed thestrals and griffins so I'll be camping out with me dear children and Brens, but I'd like to meet up with ye when I come to town if you're willing?" Antea asked.

"Sure. Since both of us are new here we can get lost together." Ron joked.

"Brilliant! And we shall then find our way back home through determination and complete ineptness!" Antea proclaimed, raising her glass up. Grinning, Ron raised his own cup up, and clicked it to hers.

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The first night by himself was a relief. He didn't have to hide how tired he was. He didn't have to wait to go to sleep. He didn't have to worry about making anyone mad because the medicine made him irritable. He didn't have anyone else to worry about at all. It was just him.

Ron collapsed into the sleeping bag from his backpack and decided that sometime soon he'd have to take out the furniture his dad was letting him borrow until he had enough money to get his own. Ron pulled his pillow close and buried his face in it as he drifted off to sleep. Thoughts and fears of what was to come tomorrow and from now on causing him to toss and turn for most of the night.

# Letters Ch5

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

**Worst luck ever. Visiting my mom for a week and a half. No internet connection. Finally get home. Go on the computer. Not shitting you... not even five minutes on the computer and I'm attacked by a virus. Finally got it fixed and I find that no internet connection is available to my laptop... eh... Going to another computer to download chapter. On a happier note:**

**Merry Christmas everyone!**

"Indifference and neglect often do much more damage than outright dislike."

**Albus Dumbledore**

*Harry Potter and the Order of the Phoenix.*

Chapter 5: Letters

*Ron was excited. His best friend had come over for the summer. His sister had finally stopped talking about his said best friend because he was here. It was going to be awesome. He could show Harry his room and they had time to hang out without having to worry about homework.*

*Then his dad pulled Harry aside to ask about trinkets of some kind... muggle stuff. He ignored it and wandered off into the living room as Harry grinned while he explained. He waited patiently since he knew it would be awhile both because his dad wouldn't stop pestering Harry until he got what he wanted and Harry would bask in the adults attention (since it wasn't 'oh Harry you're a hero' attention). He ignored the tiny voice of jealousy that seemed to whisper in his ear that he couldn't remember the last time his dad had been that interested in talking to him.*

*Ginny too was at it. It irritated him a little, that Ginny seemed so star struck by Harry, without even getting to know him. It was rather shallow of her to base everything about Harry after what she'd heard instead of what she knew. Ron ignored the tiny hurt feeling there that said his thoughts might also be based on the fact that Ginny had been more excited to know about Harry than him after their first year apart.*

*It honestly didn't bother him that the twins preferred to talk to Harry about quidditch because Harry was on the team and not him. It didn't matter that they spent hours at the table or in the living room while Ron sat on the edge feeling like a third (or forth) wheel. It didn't matter that the twins would shoot him a look when he talked as if to say 'and what would you know about that?' Not in the least. He was lonely though, which wasn't much different from usual, so he was used to it.*

*Ron was well aware that his best friend just happened to be a muggle raised, wizard hero, and a damn good quidditch seeker. It wasn't because they liked Harry better it was just... he was a knew person for them to examine who happened to have a lot of interesting things about him. He strategically ignored the fact that Fred and George had spent a year with Harry just as he had.*

*Strategically ignoring facts was simply part of being Harry Potter's best friend. Like how other students would blatantly push by him to talk to Harry or when the teachers seemed to look through him toward his best friend and how their friends always made sure to look at and speak to Harry before they even glanced at him. He was ashamed of the tiny part of him that roared up once in a while to whisper in his ear. Hermione was never bothered by it. She was more annoyed in general when a student would interrupt one of her lectures to them.*

*However... when his mother would ask Harry for help in the kitchen or would talk to him about one thing or another that was when his little voice would ignite to the point of refusing to be silenced. His mother had always ignored him in favor of Ginny the girl, but to be*

*ignored in favor of his male best friend was like a slap in the face. It was as if she had told him out right that 'I ignored you because I never wanted you, you're a disappointment' and no matter how hard he tried he couldn't make it stop repeating in his head. The only time he got to spend with her was when she asked for his help. He would complain loudly about helping because otherwise the twins would harass him, but in secret he loved every minute of it.*

*When they were children it always felt as if his mother was humoring him rather than inviting him into her and Ginny's activities. It was only the three of them for a while each day when Fred and George went to the nearby public school for basic education. Their mother didn't seem to understand that even if the twins were there they rarely wanted to spend time with him . So when she seemed to genuinely want to spend time with Harry a wall of hurt and jealousy rose up to engulf him. He tried very hard to ignore it, but the resentment towards his mom still came into existence.*

*After each occasion that Harry would stay with them Ron enjoyed spending time with his mom less and less. The genuine care and concern she held for his best friend and the overall dismissive air she held for him caused a chasm in their already slightly strained relationship. Instead of going through his kitchen chores slowly so that he could banter with her when she wasn't already distracted by her other children he finished it as quickly as possible before leaving. Instead of staying in the living room to listen in on her and Ginny's conversations he would quietly leave them alone. His mother never noticed his absents, never questioned the lack of communication between them, which only seemed to confirm that she had only been humoring him before.*

*Soon enough his resentment turned into apathy. By sixth year of Hogwarts he was more surprised than anything when she came through the door filled with worry and concern over the poisoning. Their relationship was nonexistent and as he laid in the hospital bed with her tearful eyes on him he wondered if she was questioning, just*

*as he was, when the last time they had actually talked to each other was.*

*He still loved her, and a small part of him that had yet to die still wanted her to like him, but he'd given up expecting anything from her. It made the small moments from her a little bittersweet, but appreciated. Now that he'd given up it was a great deal easier to look her in the eyes and greet her with a hug. There was no longer any hurt when she ignored him in favor of Ginny, Harry or Hermione; just a small, cold, numb spot that had previously been reserved for her.*

*The day Tom Riddle's soul spoke to him and played back his feelings concerning his mother had been a harsh blow to him. The locket had risen up and announced the tiny voice that had yet to die and told him that he had not managed to bury it far enough down to escape its eyes. He honestly wasn't sure which was worse; knowing that he still wasn't over it or Harry hearing his darkest most private thoughts.*

*He found that he couldn't look his mother, no matter how hard he tried, in the eye anymore. He knew that she had been peeking at him occasionally out of the corner of her sight this past summer, but Ron had effectively ignored her. The chasm had widened and it appeared she had finally noticed how large and wide it was only when it was too late to cross it. He found that hysterically funny, horrifically sad, and absolutely maddening all at the same time.*

*He knew that his mother was a loving and caring person, would never deny that fact, but she was also only human. He understood this and had come to the realization that she simply did not have time, energy or want to care about him. Love him yes, but not care, and there was a distinct difference. He would not whine or complain and attempted not to yearn for it, but this sudden concern she had for him was unfair.*

*She couldn't just suddenly out of nowhere change her decision. He had graduated from Hogwarts and out of her reach. She could not... would not suddenly want a relationship with him. He did not want to*



*open that small cut into a fresh wound just so she could change her mind on a whim. So he ignored her peeks and the attempts at conversation she'd made on the rare occasions they were alone. It was better that way.*

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"Ahhh... huh... ahhhaaa... huh." Ron gritted his teeth as the dark liquid of the potion was injected into his veins. He'd been warned that it would hurt of course, but he hadn't expected it to be quite so painful. It burned like fire going in and spread quickly through his body as the medi witch administering the treatment she chanted spell after spell over his curled up position on the bed. Ron closed his eyes as his back arched in pain before letting out a strangled scream.

He'd been told that this particular treatment was meant to ignite the worst areas. The spells would record the concentration of the infection over every inch of his body so that they would know what areas were the most dangerous for him. Once they found out where they would begin to block those areas off through spells.

One by one each area would then be completely drained of magic. All magic. Meaning the bad magic causing the infection and *his* magic. The problem with that would be that when a magical being loses all magic it is essentially dead which meant that they would be killing a small portion of him every time. And that was why the treatment was so dangerous and took so long.

After his magic is drained the spot would have to be magically revived before given time to heal. Not only that, but the medi witch had informed him that it would feel similar to cutting off one of his fingers once the magic is drained, an open wound that they won't be able to close up. On top of all this they would have to keep the area that's been cleansed blocked off from the rest of his body so that it doesn't become infected again. The biggest problem though was that the spots would only be from one to two inches long at a time and difficulties could arise because of how much dark magic has infected

the spot. The whole process of getting rid of the infection would take about a year and a half. And it was only the first half of the problem.

The second half was the treatment that would keep him alive long enough to go through that process. He'd been given six different potions to take throughout the day that was meant to stave off the infection from getting any worse and keep the pain it caused at a minimum. Along with the bi weekly visit to get rid of the infection there would be two additional visits to two separate doctors for strengthening spells and replenishing enchantments. Safe to say he was extremely thankful that he'd gotten ahold of an apartment that was only a few blocks from the hospital.

He was also thankful that he'd come up with a rather brilliant lie as to why his hand on the family clock would be pointing to the hospital so much. He was interning at the hospital in his free time because it looked good for Aurors to know medical spells and emergency treatment. Hermione had been so proud... Harry had been so suspicious.

On the wall a calendar sat marking the day as July 2nd. Ron gasped as the potion made it down to his legs. The sound of the woman's chanting seemed to speed up as he curled in further and wrapped his arms around himself. Another person entered the room and just as he thought he couldn't take the pain anymore the tip of a wand touched his chest. Relief flooded through him in what felt like ice. Ron opened his eyes just in time to see his fog like breath.

"Sorry Mr. Weasley," a male voice boomed, "But if we gave you that before or during the treatment then our results would be messed up. Best to have to do THAT only once."

Ron looked up into the eyes of a tall, gangly man with extremely tanned skin. Black hair fell to the tip of his ears and a small mouth sat out of place against wide cheek bones. The man, who he'd earlier been introduced as Dr. Blake, sat in the chair next to the bed. Ron nodded in understanding. Ron tried, unsuccessfully to sit up, but stopped when Dr. Blake motioned for him to stay put.

"Why am I so cold?" Ron croaked as he shivered.

"It's the only pain reliever spell capable of handling patients that are suffering from such intense pain. Unfortunately it comes with the side effect of literally chilling them to the bone. Your body will warm up slowly for the next few hours, but the good thing is that the pain reliever is good for three full days." Dr. Blake explained.

His breath hitched and he ended up coughing harshly into the pillow beneath his head. The mediwizard gave him a pitying pat on the back as the mediwitch was transferring the data collected onto sheets of paper. He shuddered. Was this what he would have to look forward to from now on?

They left him there, curled up on the bed, to attend to other business. While the potion chilled his insides Ron wondered what the others were doing. Images of Hermione and Harry immediately came to the front of his mind before anyone else. He'd spent the last six years constantly in their presence. He was all alone now. Ron closed his eyes and silently begged for the first day of treatment to be over with.

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The day before Auror training started, August 1st, Hermione and Harry along with Ginny moved the last of their stuff into the new apartment. Ginny would be boarding the Hogwarts express in two days for her final year at Hogwarts. The three of them shuffled around as they examined the final touches of the two room apartment. It had been decided, before Ron left, that the girls would share one room while the boys took the other.

Harry looked towards the empty side of his room. It was plain with no furniture or decorations. Harry had avoided putting anything in that area because Ron would eventually be living there. Placing something in that area almost felt as if he was jinxing something. He didn't know what but... he'd learned to trust his intuition.

Harry peered out of the bedroom to see his girlfriend and Hermione in the Kitchen. She was still angry with her brother for leaving. The young woman would wrinkle her nose in disgust every time Ron's name came up. Then Hermione would get irritated with Ginny and in turn Ginny would lose her temper... It was exasperating.

He didn't even understand what Ginny and the others were so upset about. Ron was just getting some training for specialty Aurors. He should never have mentioned to Ginny how he felt about going through his training without Ron, but still how would that effect Ron's other brothers? It didn't make sense. George, Bill and Charlie had all given Ron the cold shoulder. Even Percy had been avoiding him.

He didn't know quite what was going on, but he didn't like it. The night before Ron left he looked so exhausted. He hadn't said anything because he thought that getting away from his family for a bit would do his best friend some good. He just wished that Ron would tell him what the problem was.

He couldn't wait for tomorrow night though. Ron would be visiting for Ginny's seventeenth birthday. Technically her birthday wasn't until the tenth, but since she'd be at Hogwarts they were celebrating it early. Bill was the only one who wouldn't be able to make it due to a last minute curse case in Egypt that required Bill's skills.

Of course he probably wouldn't be able to spend a lot of time with Ron since Hermione planned on taking the redhead out for a date the next day and Ron could only be there for two days. Apparently Ron had found a job at some local café run by a witch in her early thirties. His best friend was sure keeping busy.

He'd seen the many hours of internship being done at the hospital and the hours being put in at work as well on the family clock. Ron's hand only seemed to point to 'home' at his apartment at night when he was probably sleeping. It made him worry a bit. Ron seemed to be taking on a lot this last month and he had to wonder how long he could keep it up.

The letters that Ron sent never mentioned anything about being tired despite what the clock said. It was all lighthearted and full of jokes. He'd tried questioning Ron about the work and school, but Ron always brushed those questions off. Hermione was 'slightly' jealous of the woman named Antea that Ron had written about to them even though Ron had mentioned a few times that he thought *Charlie* would be interested in her.

Harry couldn't help but smile. Every time one of Ron's letters came for them Hermione would get excited and then after she read it she would go from talking about how proud and happy for Ron she was to questioning what Antea's 'intentions' were. Harry knew Hermione was simply being a bit paranoid though. The tomboyish, thestral and griffin breeder clearly wasn't interested in Ron that way. Tell that to Hermione? She would just huff and turn away, muttering darkly under her breath. He loved his best friends.

"Harry can you come over here for a minute?"

"Sure."

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Ron picked up the letter for the fifth time and read over its contents. He set it down on the table, picked up Ginny's present, and walked into the kitchen. Cooked breakfast, read the letter again, got dressed. He made sure to rebandage the large black spot on his left arm after he added replenishing ointment to it. As he walked out the door he shoved the letter into his pocket before pulling it out again and reading it on his way to the school.

The director of the strategy program had agreed to allow him to participate in the nonphysical portion of the program. He started four days ago and had been doing well so far despite the exhaustion from his treatment. The other Auror trainer's gave him curious and angry looks when he left before the physical training though. Safe to say... he hadn't made any friends yet.

He entered the classroom and took one of the seats in the back. Ron ignored his aching body as it protested against the severely uncomfortable chair. Ron took out pen and paper, ignoring his trembling hands, before jotting down the notes already on the board. When he finished he pulled out the letter and read it again.

*I don't want you coming for my birthday. Don't send a present. Don't send a card. Just stay in your wonderful little world and rot.*

*-Ginny*

The trainer walked in. Ron barely noticed. He placed the letter inside his pocket again with shaking hands. The man, Mr. Lance, began an introduction about the best ways to approach a criminal. He only half listened to them as his hand moved across the paper during the lecture and when it was over a passing student touched his shoulder gently and told him class was over.

Ron nodded blankly, mumbling a thank you, before standing up and heading toward the hospital. When he entered it he was told to wait because Dr. Blake was in a meeting. Ron pulled out and read the small letter again. Put it back. Pulled it out. Folded it up. Unfolded it. Put it back.

His eyes fell on his bandaged left arm, a spot of blood shown through the white. *Rot*. The pain potion wore off last night. The spot felt as if it was being burned and Ron had to force himself not to grip it. It was the Third spot on that arm and the other spots still felt as if a hot poker was shoved just under the skin.

Dr. Blake arrived twenty minutes later and led Ron into a private designated room. The man waved his wand at him making the tip glow red. When the information transferred to paper the man frowned and clicked his tongue in disapproval. Ron fidgeted as Dr. Blake's brown eyes fell on him.

"Six pounds." Dr. Blake announced in annoyance.

"I'm sorry?" Ron asked, confused.

"It's only been a month and you've lost six pounds. We agreed if you couldn't take care of yourself that you would be moving into the hospital as an inpatient." Dr. Blake elaborated, tapping the paper.

Ron looked down in surprise. His pants had been a little loose, but he hadn't thought he'd lost that much. He'd pretty much given up eating on the day of his treatment and the day after because he just vomited everything up. He ate breakfast most of the time, but sometimes he woke up feeling nauseous and in pain. Lunch was usually doable, but dinner was difficult because the potion he had to take when he went to sleep caused him to wake in the middle of the night to puke. The main problem though was that the potions side effects caused him to completely lose his appetite for anything. He didn't enjoy eating at all, it had become a chore.

"I'll try harder to eat more." Ron promised Dr. Blake. The mediwizard looked at him skeptically before shaking his head, but leaving it at that.

"Alright Ron, you know the deal, I need you to take that bandage off so I can check that all magic is out and that it's healing." Dr. Blake murmured.

Ron nodded and sat on the bed in the room. The man unwound the bandages and checked over it. It reminded him of an earthquake really. A blackish gray spot at the epicenter with red, irritated skin around it and blood seeping in splotches from the healing blackish blue skin of the other two spots previously done. Every once and a while he would jot down a note on the papers in his hand before looking over the blackish gray skin.

"Well... it looks as if all the spots are healing at a slow, but steady rate. Are you still having trouble moving your whole arm?" Dr. Blake questioned.

Ron nodded. Since the first magical drain his left arm had felt like a led weight periodically spasming with pain. The mediwizard hmm'd at his answer before tapping his pen once more against paper.

"And what about the other side effects? Are they causing you any trouble?" The older man asked.

"I fell asleep at the café during my break the other day. I can't keep dinner down and I nearly passed out in my shower last night." Ron answered briskly.

He had already been scolded several times for trying to brush off something and downplaying things. The angry mediwizard had told him if he couldn't be truthful Ron would either live in the hospital or stop treatment.

"Hm... The best I can recommend for keeping the food down are some muggle pills. The drowsiness and dizziness can only be aided a little by getting more sleep." Dr. Blake answered honestly.

Ron rubbed his face and nodded. They'd had this conversation before, but Ron kept hoping there would be a different answer, something to make the side effects less severe. At least the pain wasn't as bad as it had been the last few months.

"I..." Ron began hesitantly. "I guess I'll take the muggle pills."

He'd been trying to avoid taking yet another dose of something in his daily schedule. It was a nightmare trying to keep track of taking what at what time and with what. Some things needed to be had with a cup of water, some with food, some needed to be taken just before bed or just when he woke up. It was all very troublesome.

"Good." Dr. Blake stated. "Now please lie down. I think it's time for another magical revival incantation."

Ron shuddered, but obeyed. His right hand immediately gripped the bar on the side of the bed. He closed his eyes and counted to ten in



his head. He felt his left arm being strapped down to the other bar with magical binds. The tip of a wand touched the center of the treated spot and Ron's entire body tensed.

"Reseasio Nunto Bransacio." Dr. Blake carefully announced.

Ron screamed himself hoarse.

It really did feel like a part of his body was being cut off.

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"Ye look like shite boyo." Antea muttered when Ron approached her for their weekly lunch at the café he worked at.

Ron smiled weakly at her as he collapsed into his seat putting his head on his folded arms immediately. She shoved a cup of cold water and a plate of toast in front of him. Ron moaned into his arms, but picked up a piece of toast and munched on it absentmindedly.

"Going home after this ain'tcha Ron?" Antea asked as she sipped what spelt like an alcoholic beverage.

"No." Ron told her miserably.

The woman gave him a confused glance before taking another sip of her drink.

"But you were looking forward to going. Yea've been talking about it for a week and a half now especially about your lass and lad." Antea said.

Ron shrugged in reply before grimacing.

"Don't call Harry my lad... that just sounds wrong." Ron told her.

"Is it some'tin to do with ye condition?" Antea asked worriedly, completely ignoring his other comment.

Ron shook his head.

"Then what's the matter Mr. Sunshine?" Antea demanded.

What could he say though? He knew Ginny wouldn't be acting like this if he told them the real reason he wasn't there. Antea didn't know that the rest of his family was ignorant to what was going on and he wanted to keep it that way. Who knew what the woman would do otherwise. He didn't want to risk it.

"Just... my sister and I aren't on the best terms." Ron replied, deciding on half the truth. "I did something before I left that was wrong and she doesn't want to talk to me. She doesn't want me coming and I understand so..." Ron shrugged again.

"Riiiiight." Antea drawled. "Pretty sure me brother could murder someone and I'd still come running if 'e told me 'e was sick."

"It's complicated." Ron told her. "And just because I'm sick doesn't mean I'm incompetent." Ron added in indignation.

Antea reached over the table and flicked Ron in the forehead. Startled he sat up and put his hand to his head.

"Yease got a bad 'abit of puttin' words in me mouth boyo. I don't appreciate it. I never suggested ye was incompetent. I said I would come to me brother's aide if 'e was sick. And I meant if 'e was in trouble I'd be there for the brat. Not any more or any less ye hear?" Antea said, irritation lacing her voice.

"Right." Ron answered. They talked for a while more, Antea shoving the rest of her toast in front of him, and before they knew it three o'clock rolled around. Ron put on the waiter's apron soon after Antea departed for a meeting concerning new meat for her griffins.

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Ron rolled his shoulders as he walked away from a young couple on their first date. He couldn't take any more pain reliever until he got home and didn't get off for another two hours. His last dose had worn

off sometime in the middle of his shift. The redhead entered the kitchen and flicked his wand to summon a cup forth for a hot cocoa.

Admittedly it had taken him a bit of time to get used to the fact that his boss, a woman named Mary Salen, used a combination of magic and muggle inventions in her cafe. He had to learn many muggle tricks in order to work there, it had been difficult, but now he was adjusted. Shaking the whip cream can he carefully piled it high. Then he took out the chocolate syrup and carefully let it drop around the mountain of cream. Satisfied with his work Ron brought it out to the front.

His attention was drawn to the table in the back where a little girl of ten sat swinging her feet back and forth absently as she did homework. His lips twitched as she gave the paper an exasperated glare. Ron walked over to the table and set the cup down quickly, trembling hands ignored expertly ignored, receiving a blush and thank you from the small child. She was much smaller than a normal girl her age with a long face and wider than normal eyes that narrowed drastically when you challenged her. Ron sat down and gently took the paper from her.

"So what's the problem Rose?" Ron asked.

Rose scrunched up her nose.

"I have to write a story about something I really like." Rose grouched.

"That's not so bad." Ron told her. "You could write about your cat Mr. Ratti or your mom. Or you could write about your wonderful friend that brings you awesome hot cocoa." Ron teased.

Her blush from before came back with a vengeance. Ron always made sure to be extra nice to her because she was the reason he'd managed to find a job so quickly... and she was sick like him. Rose had been born a squib and at the young age of four been diagnosed with cancer. He met her in the hospital that first week shortly before one of his treatments.

She, like him, was undergoing a difficult treatment so they spent a great deal of time trying to distract each other from the pain. Thankfully it was a far less aggressive cancer than most and the chances of her dying were becoming more slim by the day. Rose had already survived the worst part of her illness and was in the stage of recovering. The treatment she was getting was painful, but it was simply to get rid of the leftover visages of her cancer.

Ron found that the little girl was very mature for her age and this reminded him of Hermione. Her slightly shy nature and kindness reminded him of Harry though. Her resemblance to his two best friends made it easy for him to develop a soft spot for her almost immediately. He spent much of his time with her trying to make the girl laugh. It was clear to him that she needed it badly.

It was the third date they'd been assigned the same room for treatment when he'd mentioned he would be searching for a job after he recovered from that day's enchantments. Her mother had straightened and smiled before asking him if he would like to work for her. One of the discussions they had that day after Rose fell asleep was that Ron would check on her daughter and make sure she was getting along well.

Rose was apparently in her rebellious stage early and didn't want to look 'like a baby who needed her mother to check on her every few minutes.' So Ron would casually bring her a drink or pastry or some such every once and a while. Mary Salen had been ecstatic to find a worker that could relate to her daughter and seemed to genuinely want to help her.

"I'm not sure how to start." Rose pouted.

"Hm... I've always had the same problem too. Hermione would always be yelling at me about that." Ron told her.

The little girl frowned.

"This Hermione doesn't seem very nice." She said, tucking a piece of hair behind her ear.

"She's a very nice person it's just that I need a lot of motivation to start paperwork and she knows that." Ron said, a bit of longing attacked him then, but he buried it.

He wondered what they were doing then. Probably sitting around a table with Ginny opening up presents or blowing out the candles of whatever cake they bought. Harry and Hermione would probably be irritated with him, but his mom would hardly notice. His dad might be disappointed, but wouldn't say anything, he never did.

"Kinda like what you're doing for me right now?" Rose asked, taking a cautious sip of her hot cocoa.

"Yeah, sorta, so how would you normally open up a story?" Ron asked her.

"Something interesting... like when mama first found out she was pregnant and screamed 'Lordy, lordy! Not with him!' and then she came out and asked me if I wanted a baby sister or brother." Rose chattered happily.

Ron had a hard time keeping a straight face as she continued on. He let her talk for a while, checking the time, and how busy the café was. He helped her start her story before going back to the customers.

He was startled to see Mrs. Mary Salen watching him with a sparkle in her eyes from the doorway of the kitchen. Her thin frame was offset by the six month baby bump, causing her to tilt slightly backward in compensation. When he entered to get the orders of two separate tables she gently tugged the sleeve of his shirt to get his attention.

"Thank you for that. I haven't seen her this happy in a while." Mary whispered softly. Her voice was naturally loud, causing the soft

sound to carry across the room easily, despite her attempt to deep it lowered. A few patrons looked up briefly in a disinterested fashion before returning back to their work.

"Glad to help. She's a sweet kid." Ron said as he put some dishes into the sink.

He flicked his wand absentmindedly and they began cleaning themselves.

"I mean it. All my other workers don't mind checking up on her, but they don't interact with her and she's already with me so much all the time that she just... wants some time alone when I drag her along to work with me." Mary explained.

Ron's ears turned red as the woman looked at him in gratitude and appreciation. He shrugged nonchalantly.

"I've got five ( *four now, he thought silently to himself* ) older brothers and a little sister so..." He trailed off not sure what to say. "... so I'm used to interacting with people of different ages. It's not weird or awkward and besides... she really is a good kid. She's smart for her age and mature as well."

Mary nodded happily before squeezing Ron's shoulder in thanks before moving to the front of her shop to check on the cashier. Thunder boomed outside thought the sky wasn't dark quite yet. Ron sighed.

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Hermione growled in agitation at him.

Harry just sighed as the girl poured over the message again. Ron had sent a last minute message informing them that he'd been called into work last minute because one of the workers was sick. Ron's hand had been on the 'work' hand of the clock for several hours now.

They waited long into the morning for Ron to arrive only for Pig to enter the window with a letter in his mouth. Harry had a feeling before Hermione even opened it about what it concerned. There was no other reason, but a delay or cancelation, to send Pig instead of simply telling them himself when he arrived.

Charlie and George had scowled when they read over the letter while Percy simply pressed his lips together till they were so thin they appeared as one single line. Ginny, Harry decided, had been far too pleased with the contents of the letter.

After Molly Weasley had read the letter she glanced toward Percy for a long moment before turning away. Arthur took her into the next room and they talked for several minutes before they both came back into the room with slightly strained smiles. Percy seemed even more on edge than normal as he glanced at each of his family members, looking away when they're eyes moved toward him.

It wasn't that Ron had done anything wrong, but his actions and behaviors were very reminiscent of another Weasley just before his betrayal. Harry knew that Ron would never do something like that though. He only wished he could compel this knowledge into the minds of the people around him.

"Well... let's not get all down in the dumps because Ronnie can't make it." Molly stated as she bustled over to the kitchen area.

"Whose done in the dumps?" Ginny muttered. Harry sent her a warning glance before the two of them followed everyone else.

"Stop it Gin." Harry said softly.

She let out an indignant huff.

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"Ron, can you..." Mary whispered, but she didn't need to finish the sentence.

Ron leaned down over a small figure and bundled her up in his arms. Soft breaths hit his shoulder as the sleeping child snuggled deeper into his warmth. He winced as her head dug into the wound on his arm and adjusted his hold on her so that his right held most of her body.

Mary gave him a grateful, weary smile, hand subconsciously going to her stomach. The boyfriend, a man named Hardin Rudolf, split the moment Mrs. Salen told him about the child. It wasn't that he was particularly mean spirited, but rather just extremely irresponsible and more than a little cowardly. At least that's what one of his coworkers had described him as when Ron first found out about the situation.

Mary Salen always closed up shop by herself since she lived just upstairs, but Ron usually helped her tuck Rose into bed before leaving for the night. He nearly dropped a plate the first night he'd seen the woman attempt to pick up the girl to take to bed. He couldn't help but see his own mother in this kindhearted woman. So he gave up an hour of sleep to help her out on the nights he worked.

His body strained slightly under the small girl's weight causing him to inwardly scowl at himself. He quickly brought her up stairs, and laid her into bed, making sure to pull the blanket over her. His entire body trembled slightly, pain spiking every minute or so, due to the medicine wearing off.

"Thank you dear. Why don't you join me for some tea and some of the shops leftovers before you head home?" Mary asked from the doorway.

"Alright." Ron agreed.

The food she was offering would have to be thrown away anyways if he didn't eat it. Plus he knew that the woman was lonely. Keeping up with running a business and going to the hospital all the time kept her from having a social life. That's why she'd been willing to go out with Rudolf in the first place. He was cowardly, but very charming.



"So how is the treatment going sweetie? And don't lie, Rosie does that to me, and I can't help you if I don't know about it." Mary warned as she pulled down teacups and plates. Her hair, held strictly in a bun, began to unravel some leaving hair stranded at the side of her face. An image of Tonks came to mind and, he briefly mused, they were just about the same age. Baby Teddy's

"It's been hard. Some of the mediwizards make me feel more like I'm a particularly nasty job they got saddled with instead of a person." Ron sighed in exhaustion, taking a careful sip of the hot tea.

"I wish I could say that it will get better, but it won't. The worse you get the more they'll treat you like that. I think they distance themselves from the job so that they don't develop attachments. They deal with high risk patients all the time after all and most of them have probably been hurt when they lose them." Mary explained softly.

Ron wasn't sure what to say so instead they just sat in companionable silence for a little while. Ron's hands shook hard as he tore a strawberry pastry apart and popped pieces into his mouth. He chewed slowly, concentrating on that rather than the way the room seemed to be moving on its own. When he finished Ron took the keys of the store and placed them in their rightful spot above Mary Salen's safekeep box.

"They're people Ron. They do care... they'll try their hardest." Mary told him sternly.

Ron nodded

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Walking against the wind as he walked home Ron fought against a wave of lightheadedness. The walls of the buildings on either side of him seemed to distort and lengthen. His trembling got worse to the point that his legs felt like Jell-O and refused to support him any longer. Ron stumbled over to a wall of one of the newer looking building in the town before sliding down its side. A couple people

glanced his way, but no one stopped to ask if he needed help. He probably looked more like someone who was drunk than anything else.

Ron brought his legs up against his chest and leaned his head on his knees trying desperately to stop his world from distorting and morphing about. His trembling hands dug through his robe till they grasped a bottle. Pulling out the water Ron put it to his lips, attempting to avoid dropping any on himself, and drank half the bottle in less than a minute.

Ron focused on his breathing while trying not to panic over the fact that the pain in his arms and back was only intensifying the longer he sat there. The world wasn't going back to normal, but was instead steadily getting darker.

What had Dr. Blake said to do if this happened? Ron tried to concentrate but was finding it extremely difficult. This was... this was... Dr. Blake said if he overexerted himself there was a chance he... would... Another wave of dizziness hit him. Ron tilted to the side dangerously. He dropped the bottle of water and kept his hands on either side of him. Where was he? Wasn't he supposed to do something if he felt like this in public? His forehead throbbed.

He was passing out. Overexertion would cause his body to start to shut down. There was something dangerous to that though wasn't there? Something about needing medicine to... replenish his magic cause he overtaxed it. One of Ron's hands, he wasn't sure which one, patted his robes searching for the emergency potion.

A hand touched his head. Someone was talking to him. Ron opened his eyes, but all he saw was a distorted and darkening figure in front of him. Their words were fuzzy too. Could words be fuzzy?

He tried telling this person that he needed to take the medicine somewhere in his right pocket, but he wasn't sure how well he succeeded. He felt his mouth move and something come out, but didn't know what. Then the last of his sight left him. He could still feel

the hand on him, moving about his person, but everything was dark. He could also hear the voice talking to him, but he be damned if he knew what it was they were saying. He was fading out.

Ron felt something touch his lips. A cold liquid slid down his throat. Ron gasped in surprise and shock as his body suddenly felt like it was on fire. Jerking up... when had he gone down? He breathed harshly for several long minutes and felt himself blinking rapidly. The hand that was on him became distinct to him. Large, strong, firm... a man. Breath hit his face as the man continued talking to him and now those words were making sense.

"... ear me? I need you to make some kind of response for me okay. Anything will do. Shake your head. Tell me your name. Grab my hand." The man said in a stern, but gentle voice.

Ron reached out and grabbed the forearm that gripped his shoulder, nodding his head slowly, and with deliberation. He still couldn't see. His body still felt like it was being burned and trembled so much he was sure he looked like he was vibrating.

"Good." The man's voice said. "Now I'm going to take you to the hospital."

Ron wanted to protest, to say that he was okay now, but the truth was he was terrified. Despite several warnings that the mediwizards and witches had given him Ron had not expected overexerting himself to be this horrible... this terrifying. Dr. Blake told him that if this were to happen and he lost his sight that it would only be temporary. He said that each time he'd lost his eyesight it was because his body was trying to make him go to sleep in order to refuel his magic. The problem was that his magic needed medicine right now in order to replenish due to his body being so drained constantly by the treatment.

The man pulled Ron's arm over his shoulder and placed his hand around the redhead's waist in order to support him. Ron attempted to mutter a 'thank you,' but wasn't sure if he succeeded or not. He felt

his body being lifted up and attempted to walk, but his feet wouldn't stay under him right. They kept dragging in the dirt.

"You're gonna be okay mate. I've got you." The deep male voice told him. Ron didn't trust his voice so instead he just nodded. As they walked his vision began to return to him and he very nearly cried in relief. It didn't matter what the medic said he'd still been scared out of his mind that he would be blind for life. He found it was also easier to walk the longer they continued on and found the smallest bit of pride when he could take some of his weight out of the kind stranger's arms.

When they entered the hospital he felt at least three different pairs of arms take ahold of him. He didn't know if they were one of his medics because everything was still incredibly blurry. Ron tried to turn, to at least get a glimpse of who saved him, but the medics were having none of that. He felt his body being levitated and the sensation brought such dizziness that he almost passed out.

As he faded out for good he could hear the voice of his nurse Mrs. Cecily talking to the other medics. Distantly he heard the man's voice speaking to someone, but both their voices were gone in a moment.

Ron groaned as he woke up. His left arm felt numb, but his right arm and back were ablaze with pain. He blinked and winced as the too bright room hit his eyes, but simply sighed as he recognized it as the white rooms of a hospital. Ron pulled himself into a sitting position and leaned heavily against the back of the bed as his head spun in response.

When his nurse, Cecily, finally walked in half an hour later she clucked at him disapprovingly while scribbling things down on a sheet of paper. His afternoon, which he noted with chagrin should have been spent at the Auror training, was filled with three different lectures concerning how much sleep he was getting: too little.

He wished Harry and Hermione were there. He really hadn't anticipated that not having them to talk to about his nightmares (their

nightmares) would be such a problem. He wished that the damn things were bogarts so that he could simply yell out ridiculous and turn in all into something funny. Sleeping drought was not an option since it mixed badly with his other medicines.

Then there was all the things he needed to do; the strategy training that met every other day in the morning, all the hospital visits, and work at the café each night when he wasn't in the hospital. He knew that going to Auror strategy training was not a necessity, but he desperately wanted to make sure he wasn't too far behind Harry and Hermione. He wanted to come back from this illness with something to show for all his struggle.

"You have a visitor Mr. Weasley." Nurse Cecily told him in a clipped voice. Ron smiled sheepishly at the woman who was clearly still irritated with him. She left the room and in walked a young man in his mid-twenties who Ron thought looked vaguely familiar. His black, mop like hair fell messily around a tan face and a friendly smile.

"Hi, my names Sam Traux, everybody calls me Traux. I'm in your strategy class with you." The man named Traux informed him.

The voice immediately told him that he was also the man who helped him out last night. He didn't remember every face in his 'class' since they'd only started a week ago, but he figured he would remember this one from now on.

"Thank you," Ron said gratefully, "Not quite sure what would have happened to me if you hadn't come along."

The man's smile fell a bit at Ron's admittance. His brow furrowed in confusion and eyes shining with both curiosity and mild concern.

"Yeah... I hope I don't come off as rude or anything, but what happened? You looked like you were having a heart attack or something." Traux pried.

Ron grimaced, he hadn't wanted anyone at the school to be aware of his illness yet, but he owed the man for saving his skin. He knew that his classmates would eventually know about it. It wasn't as if he could hide the weight loss or anything else that would change his appearance in the next few months, but he still had wanted to preserve his normal image for a bit longer.

"I... got hit with a lot of dark magic a while ago. Thought it was all gone, but apparently there was some still inside me all this time. It caused me to get really sick. The medi's are giving me a special treatment of potions to get rid of it, but it's going to be a long process." Ron explained carefully. Even if he owed the man an explanation didn't mean he planned on spilling all his secrets to a stranger. Sam Traux seemed intrigued, but was polite enough not to dig any deeper.

"That's why you haven't participated in any of the physical stuff right? Seems kinda chancy coming here to study Aurorship when you're so sick though." Traux said thoughtfully.

"My best friend and my girlfriend are both going into regular Auror training and I didn't want to get too left behind when I get back." Ron half answered.

Traux 'hmm'd' in answer as he looked around the hospital room.

"So when you had that heart attack thing it was the dark magic attacking you?" Traux asked, scrunching his nose up in evident displeasure.

"Kinda. It's not that it attacked me, but more like it wore down my body. It's sort of like an infection that's very slowly been getting worse." Ron told him as he picked up a glass of water beside his desk. The older man visibly frowned and peered at him with a hint of concern in his eyes.

"So your saying that you constantly feel back? It doesn't come in spurts your just always hurting and sometimes it gets too much?"

Traux questioned, trying to grasp the idea, before shuddering. "You must be crazy, going to school and all, I'd have moved home and moped in my room with my little T.V."

Taken by surprise Ron laughed loudly. He recognized the muggle term T.V from one of his dad's speeches and Hermione had mentioned it at least a few times. He didn't really get it, watching moving pictures for hours on end, but he understood the concept. Entertainment. Ron decided that it was his turn to ask a question.

"So why are you in Auror training then?"

The smile that had been on Traux's face disappeared instantly. He looked around the room again, before leaning in close to Ron. A very serious expression had transformed his face and Ron felt as if he was looking at a completely different person. Traux's eyes were icy as he whispered to him.

"Prisoner interrogation training."

There was silence for several seconds as they both stood completely still.

"Bahhahahahahahaha..." Traux burst out. "The look... hahahaha... on your face... hehehe... was soooooooo priceless!"

Ron glowered at the older boy, trying valiantly to hide the smile that was twitching at his lips. Perhaps his day wasn't completely ruined and useless after all. Ron gave up fighting and let the grin spread across his face. Traux was holding his sides as he tried to breathe and sat back.

"Oh man mate. It was like I killed your puppy. Worse even! Like I was a dementor come to kiss your soul away." Traux gasped out.

"Laugh it up." Ron announced. "Now that I know how you play I won't be falling for your tricks again."

Traux grinned.

"Oh... I wasn't joking about that mate."

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Later that evening, after the nurse gave him his release papers, Ron made it home. Pig fluttered around indignantly, back from his trip to the Burrow, with two letters attached to his leg. Ron's lips twitched as the tiny scops owl shook its leg impatiently. Ron untied the letters, instantly recognizing his mother's handwriting on the front and the other from Aunt Muriel, before grabbing a few small owl treats for the bird.

Pig, much to Ron's amusement, immediately became excited. His anger apparently forgotten Pig hooted happily up at him from his spot on Ron's small dinner table. He decided to leave his window open, since he didn't know whether the tiny owl had gone hunting yet, and went straight to the bed in the corner of the room. On his way he tossed out Aunt Muriel's letter without bothering to open it.

Unpleasant old hag. She always had a 'remark' about him that she had to inform him about. Hermione had made a scene the first time she saw Ron toss out one of his Aunt's letter without reading it, but over the years she had stopped. Ron guessed she probably pulled one out of the trash at some point and knew why he didn't read them.

Turning on the little lamplight next to him Ron carefully opened the letter. He honestly didn't want to. He knew what would be inside, but the thought of tossing it seemed too cowardly. Ron took a deep breath and began to read.

*Ronald Weasley I can't believe you would do this to your sister. I understand you needed to work, but the least you could have done was send her a card! Whatever went on between you and your siblings while you were here this summer is no reason to treat them badly! I'm very disappointed in you. This is a time when we should be sticking together and your shenanigans' is putting a strain on this*



*family. Poor Harry and Hermione were disappointed when your letter came. They deeply miss you Ronald. I know your sister does too. We all do.*

*With all my Love*

*-Your mother*

So Ginny hadn't said anything to them about not wanting him there. The little twit. He should have known. Ron let out a breath. He'd written an excuse in his letter about work because he didn't want to admit that what Ginny had said hurt him. He didn't think she'd take it as free reign to blame him for the whole thing though. She turned out more like Fred and George than he thought.

Ron sighed. His mom thought it was all his fault now too. That meant that if he did somehow manage to visit her before he started looking ill it would be awkward at the house. Should he even try to visit before it got that bad? Or would it only make things harder to cut ties once it did? Ron pulled the pillow closer to him and closed his eyes. He could think about it later. Now he just wanted to sleep.

## Part 2: The prophecy

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

"The consequences of our actions are so complicated, so diverse, that predicting the future is a very difficult business indeed."

### Albus Dumbledore

*Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban.*

### Part 2: The Prophecy

Harry strolled down the halls of Hogwarts marveling at how well the newer portions of his old home had managed to integrate itself with the older ruins that had been the remains after the final battle. He missed this place. Students gawked at him as he moved by, but he ignored them. He'd gotten very good at it without Ron by his side to shoo people away. Harry wasn't sure how much longer he could take obnoxious people shoving things in his face and demanding him spend time answering their questions or wanting favors from him. He'd taken to keeping his invisibility cloak with him at all times; something he had never had to resort to while his best friend was around. And isolating himself at the Burrow when not performing Auror duties.

Hermione was overseas in France right then following a lead concerning a death eater that had been absent during the last battle. She was, of course, delighted in how busy they were. She'd always been the one that took too much in her hands when she didn't want to think of other things. Ron's time away was hitting her hard regardless of how hard she tried to keep that from him.

Despite the fact that they were only trainees Kingsley had been sending them out on Auror missions under the Order of the Phoenix. It wasn't that the man wanted to push them into dangerous situations

they weren't ready for... it was that they were some of the few Order members that had survived the war. There were very few fully trained Auror members left so that left Harry and Hermione with the unfair burden of taking care of any missions that the official Aurors didn't have time for.

Only a month and a half had passed since they started training and they'd already been sent on six missions. Neither Harry nor Hermione complained, they knew the situation, and they accepted it. The problem was that they were being separated for missions. Harry, Hermione, and Ron had spent years planning, strategizing and throwing ideas to one another before performing them. They knew and expected each other to be at their backs. Now that they had strangers watching their backs they found themselves glancing over their shoulders, double checking anything the Aurors handed to them, trying to keep up with everything at once where they would have once trusted the other to take care of it.

The other Aurors had lost their patients with Harry and Hermione's paranoid and distrusting actions on a few occasions already. Kingsley had taken to sending them on simple solo missions or making sure that the two of them were always on the same team. They both agreed not to mention anything to Ron for the moment. Kingsley couldn't ask Ron to help out when the redhead was all the way across the planet.

He was getting slightly nervous now though... They hadn't been able to spend that much time training and Auror Exams were in November to see if he and Hermione were good enough to move on to the next level of training. Kingsley kept promising them time to practice with older Aurors, but that time kept getting cancelled for more important things. He understood perfectly well that it was necessary, but that didn't keep him from becoming nervous about it.

Harry entered the headmistress's office and peered around the room carefully. Neither Snape nor McGonagall had changed much since Dumbledore's death. Harry sat in the chair in front of the desk in preparation for a long wait. Hagrid had mentioned something about

Mcgonagal dealing with some type of transfigured mess at the moment. He glanced at the two favorite portraits in the room and smiled as he noticed Dumbledore and Snape in the midst of a heated discussion. They hadn't even noticed he'd entered the room.

Harry closed his eyes and messaged his face with his hand. The stress was getting to him a bit. He and Hermione were still expected to do all the regular training sessions with the current trainees on top of the missions. The wizarding world was still pulling themselves together and some of the magical creatures such as the dementors and goblins were creating a great deal of chaos.

And George... George had closed himself off from everyone slowly but surely. He still met up with him and Hermione for lunch every other day, but his smiles were strained and he was forcing himself to sound cheery. They had tried everything, even joining up with Bill and Fleur, in order to help their friend. Nothing worked.

He had asked Ron for tips on how to go about handling the situation, but Ron's way simply didn't work for Harry. He didn't know how to treat George normally as if nothing was wrong because there was clearly something very wrong. He didn't understand what it would accomplish to sit in the room with George, 'but don't say anything.'

An upset Hermione meant that she wanted him to listen to her get everything out. An upset Ron meant that he wanted him to distract him from the problem by any means necessary. An upset Ginny meant that she wanted to yell at him and stomp her foot for a little while before finally snuggling up to him and explaining what the problem was and talking about how to fix it. Those were all proactive things. The idea of simply sitting in a room and doing nothing to fix the problem felt wrong.

The door to Dumbld... Mcgonagal's office opened up to reveal the woman herself. She gave Harry and apologetic smile as she walked behind her desk and sat down.

"Rough day?" Harry asked.

"Not nearly so." McGonagal said as her lips twitched. "A rough day would be dealing with the twins or your lot. I honestly don't know what to do with all my free time."

Harry broke out in a smile and relaxed from his stressed state by one of his professors rare jokes. He supposed that since he wasn't technically her student anymore she could be less formal with him.

"I'm sure that you'll have a new batch soon enough to take up your time." Harry said knowingly.

"I wasn't aware that any of the Weasley's were expecting." McGonagal replied.

"Expecting wha..." Harry started to ask but stopped. He looked at McGonagal's serious expression, taken aback, before bursting out laughing. "Oh no... maybe from Bill or Fleur in a few years, but I think for the rest of us it will be awhile."

McGonagal nodded, face completely straight, but eyes twinkling in a way that reminded him of Dumbledore. They were more alike than he'd thought.

"So I take it that something has happened concerning the Order?" McGonagal asked, becoming the stiff, stern woman he'd known all these years.

"Yes. Peter Pettigrew managed to escape the Auror team that was sent after him. He's believed to be heading south towards Japan. He said that you knew a contact from that area who could head a team without getting caught trespassing into the Japanese's wizarding community." Harry explained.

The entire Asian continent and their isles taught at magic at a secluded academy ever since the beginning of the first war with Voldemort. They didn't want anything to do with the rest of the world and became infuriated whenever 'other' members of the wizarding world came into their world for any reason.

"I do have a contact. I'll get in touch with him immediately to see if he can perform the task. Who else will be in this team?"

"Dedalas Diggle, Edger Bones and a new Auror named Heather Rye. They would prefer to leave as soon as tomorrow if that's possible and if not simply as fast as it can be arranged." Harry told her.

Mcgonagal nodded, her expression solemn and thoughtful, her eyes turned hard as they peered at him over her spectacles. When she spoke it was quiet, but angry.

"I can't believe that man managed to escape up during the final battle. It was his cowardly acts that brought the second war upon us and lead to the deaths of so many. How he managed to fool us for so many years before... it's quite frightening."

Harry could only nod in agreement. Mcgonagal straightened before taking a breath.

"So tell me Mr. Potter, why not simply send a patronus to me with the information? You know very well that I would have done it. There was no need to have a response from me. It seems rather silly to come all the way out here just to tell me." Mcgonagal inquired. The twinkle had returned.

"Well... I... it was very important and you might have needed to tell me something about the contact." Harry tried to explain.

"She should be about to leave her Divination class in ten minutes. If you hurry you can catch her." The woman said quietly.

Harry nodded and stood with a blush across his cheeks.

"Yes mam. Thank you."

When he found her she had his back turned to him. Standing on the stairs leading directly into the tower room talking to one of her

friends. Harry put his arms around her, feeling her tense at the unexpected touch, and placed his head on her shoulder.

"Hello, fancy seeing you here." Harry whispered into her long, red hair.

Ginny spun around so that she was facing him in his arms as her friend giggled and walked passed them further down the stairs. Apparently whatever conversation they were having could wait until Harry was gone. He liked Ginny's friend.

"Harry! What in the world are you doing here?" Ginny asked excitedly.

"Order business, but I'm done now and thought I'd come and see you before I leave."

Ginny leaned forward and kissed him. Harry smiled as her soft lips touched his chapped ones. His hand's moved to support her around the waist as she put her hands around his neck. Her warmth against his was reassuring. He missed this. He missed her. When they broke the kiss the two of them simply stayed in that position for several long minutes enjoying each other's company.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Ginny and Harry looked up to see a crystal ball falling down the steps. Harry sighed and pulled away. His hand grabbed the ball before it could fall any further. The cool, smooth surface reflected their image as he held it up between them.

"I'll take this up to Trelawney. Go ahead. I have to leave anyways. We've got a training session tonight concerning flight formation and Hermione wants me there in case she does something wrong." Harry told him girlfriend.

"Tell Hermione not to worry too much about it." Ginny said, thin rose colored lips twitching into a smile. She grabbed something from

around her neck and placed it in Harry's free hand. "Give her this as a good luck charm, but she has to give it back."

Harry peered down at the necklace to see it was a piece of Fred's wand that had broken apart in those last moments of his life. Each one of Fred's siblings had received a small part of it. Ginny's was encircled by a glass ball on the end of a silver necklace. Bill had his attached to his single earring in place of the tooth he'd worn before the war. Charlie had integrated his into his best pair of dragon hide gloves he wore into the field. Percy kept his safely locked away in box inside his apartment. George had asked Mr. Olivander to merge his piece with his wand.

"Thanks Gin, I know that it will make her feel better." Harry told her.

Ginny smiled and nodded. Leaning forward she gave Harry one last chaste kiss before disappearing down the tower stairs. Harry sighed before heading upwards. The door creaked, as it had always done, and the floors groaned. The wild grayish brown hair of Trelawney showed no signs of movement despite him knowing that she knew he was there. Harry put his hand on the woman's shoulder.

"Professor? One of your glass balls fell down the stairs again." Harry informed her.

He jerked in surprise when the crystal ball in his hands suddenly began to get hot and turn black. Harry dropped it, letting it clatter to the floor and roll. Something gripped his arm tightly causing Harry to jump back and pull out his wand, but he stilled as the bespectacled, glassy eyes of Trelawney bore into his own. She rasped for breath seemingly struggling for each one.

"The child born at the height of the dark lords first reign of the rebellious pure-bloods... huuuh and who took the poisoning... ahhuu of the dark lords oldest enemy wilts under the hold of death. Death must be returned before life is dragged into the abyss!" The woman collapsed in her seat again without another word.



Harry stared in shock before immediately searching his body for something to write with. He frantically looked around the room and found an ink quill. Quickly he wrote down the prediction with shaking hands. This woman, after all, had predicted the fall and eventually rebirth of Voldemort. Harry turned back to the woman, noticing that the crystal ball beside the wall had once more returned to its see through appearance. Sybil Trelawney blinked several times before noticing Harry standing several feet from him shoving a piece of paper in his pocket.

"Potter dear... when did you get back?" The woman asked bewildered, blinking rapidly through her thick glasses.

"Just here to deliver McGonagal a message." Harry said hurriedly. He picked up the crystal ball once more and handed it to her. "This fell down your stairs again. I'm afraid I must be going now."

Before the woman could utter another word Harry was already halfway down the tower.

## **Bereft Ch6**

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

**A/N: Been in and out of the emergency room all week taking care of my little sister. She'll be fine but I've gotten really backtracked because of her and other things on writing so chances are that there will be no updates from me on anything for a Month. Sorry guys. Everything had to be put on hold so i could have my fingers broken by her while they cut her open. So to make it up here's an extra long chapter. This was actually suppose to be two chapters... one now and the next part next Saturday. But since I barely have time to post this real quick I figured I'll just combine them. I hadn't written a flashback intro for the second chapter anyways so it worked out well.**

**Just so you guys know... My family is sort of backwards from the Weasley's. I'm the oldest with four sisters and one brother. There's an eight year difference between me and the youngest. So when I'm writing about the Weasley siblings just know that it comes from a lot of experience. Siblings can be very spiteful. I think it's rather ridiculous of phychologists to (for the most part) ignore the significants of siblings. I don't even think Rowling really adaqautely described a large family well... You can't unless you've lived it I think. Siblings know your darkest secrets and while they would NEVER tell other people often times it come up in arguements when your filled with anger and resentment and if your losing those things will be used.**

**-The point is that when I create flashbacks it's words that stick to you. The words that either hurt you the worst or inspire you the best. When I create the flashbacks I'm starting with the bad ones that created Ron's low self esteem we see. I'm not creating a 'all of Ron's siblings are horribel people to him' theme here. These are the worst things they've said to him that have stuck to him. Not the entire relationship he has with them. (Except for**

**Molly and Ginny... I wanted their relationship foundation set out so that you would understand why they react in certain ways)**

"Numbing the pain for a while will make it worse when you finally feel it."

**Albus Dumbledore**

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.*

Chapter 6: Bereft

*Freddy and Georgie*

*Sitting across mama's lap*

*Cause they can't say sorry*

*For giving their brother a mean tap*

*They can't be nice*

*They don't think twice*

*So mama took her spoon*

*Made two blue moons*

*And spanked them in front of a full room*

*Ron sang his made up rhyme for three whole days as George and Fred glowered at him each time he came in sight. It served them right for being so mean to him all the time. The looks on their faces when their mother demanded they drop their pants for her to spank them on the behind in front of a room full of their relatives was just priceless. Of course he made sure his mom never heard the little rhyme. He'd be dead meat served on a platter for her if that happened.*

*The two of them had been tormenting him since he could remember. Turning his Teddy bear into a spider. Telling him stories about what the ghoul in the attic was going to do to him. Insulting him all the time. Making his toys stick together. Creating holes in embarrassing places within his clothes. Treating him like he was a girl... telling him that Ginny was better than him in everything. He wanted them to stop. He wanted them to play with him and treat him nice. They didn't want anything to do with him unless it was mean though.*

*So he sang and annoyed them. He was very much aware that he was being unbelievably obnoxious, but he was rather proud of the catchy little tune he'd made. It was clever and all his own. It wasn't the twins idea or anyone but his. It wasn't something that was handed down to him as a leftover. It was an idea that he owned. Ginny could have all the new clothes she wanted as long as he had the little things he created.*

*Ron hummed lightly to the tune as he wandered away from the house and further into the wooded area. It was cold outside in the November air and his too thin coat caused a chill to rush along his spine, but he didn't mind. Ginny and his mom were off somewhere to do errands together. Percy, Charlie and Bill were still at Hogwarts. His Dad was at work and the twins... wanted to be as far away from him as possible.*

*Since Ginny and his mom liked to be together without him so much he was used to being alone a lot. To avoid the unpleasant hollow feeling being alone brought him Ron had come up with several different entertainment ideas for himself. He would take long walks, like he was doing now, along the road and in the back where the woods were. He would play chess where he was both players (which you should know made it very hard to win). He would listen to Quidditch games on the radio. The loneliness still got to him a lot though.*

*"You think you're real smart don't you?" A familiar voice muttered darkly.*

*Ron jumped and spun to see Fred glaring at him angrily from his spot leaning against a tree trunk. Ron backed up and looked around for George. Many people just accepted that the twin's personalities were pretty much the same; only close family members and friends knew that there were several distinct differences, it was just that they're similar traits were very strong and dominant.*

*George and Fred were easy to anger and easy to forgive (as long as you apologized). The two of them were far more relaxed and fun loving than the other Weasley siblings. They were innovative and mischievous. They both tended to be impatient and came off as snide when angered. They were fiercely loyal to each other and unwillingly to admit when they were wrong. Their differences though... were subtle but powerful.*

*George was sarcastic while Fred was cynical. George tried to lighten the mood in the room while Fred wanted to bluntly state the facts. George was more considerate when it came to pulling their pranks while Fred would feel bad about the consequences once it was over with. Fred was much more rash in his decisions than George, but George wasn't as passionate as Fred either.*

*Ron's lips thinned as he noticed that George wasn't around. Fred walked up to Ron until their faces nearly touched causing Ron to stumble back quickly.*

*"Little Ronnnie's grown a big head cause he can make words rhyme and is a little tattletaling brat!" Fred snapped.*

*"Maybe if you wouldn't be such a git there wouldn't be anything to tell about!" Ron replied.*

*Fred's face reddened and Ron knew he had made his already angry brother even angrier.*

*"Proud to be a sniveling little snitch are you?" Fred hissed. "Hoping maybe mommy will pay attention to you if you brown nose up to her?"*

*Ron stilled. He was expected Fred to be hot headed, to throw insults around, but right now he was just plain cold. The eight year old stepped back from his older brother with hurt written across his face. Fred wasn't done yet though.*

*"You know... Mom cried when she found out you were a boy." Fred told him. "The mediwitch told her for three months that she was going to have a girl and then just before you were born she found out you were a boy. She cried herself to sleep for days on end. Mom never wanted you. I bet she'd trade you out the first chance she got."*

*Ron felt tears form at the corner of his eyes and his bottom lip trembled, but he refused to let Fred see what he'd done. He turned and ran deeper into the wooded area, losing himself in the cornfield quickly, stumbling over his own feet. Finally falling to the ground and onto his knees Ron cursed his clumsiness and his stupid, stupid brother. It wasn't true. Fred was just being mean. His mommy cared about him. His mommy wanted him... he was... he was... lying. He had to be.*

*When he finally made it back to the house later that day Ginny and their mom were in the kitchen making dinner. He stayed in the doorway watching his mom smile at his baby sister, pushing long red hair back behind her daughter's ear with a fond sparkle in her eyes, before handing her the salt to put in the potatoes. Neither of them looked his way or acknowledged that he was in the room at all and it was only now that he realized that they never even bothered to ask him if he wanted to go with them before they left.*

*'She probably didn't want to wake me up.' Ron told himself. He didn't go any further into the kitchen though... instead he went up to his bedroom. As he passed by the twin's room he felt George's glare on him from the open doorway. He chanced a peek and flinched back as the brown eyes bore into him. Fred refused to look at him at all. Ron raised his head high and kept walking, but he never sang the rhyme again.*

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Ron Weasley was utterly and undeniably worn down to his very bones. As he walked into the hospital room in rumpled clothes, which he wasn't quite sure had been clean when he tossed them on this morning, he sagged into the bed assigned to him. He didn't want to get up again. It felt as if his whole body had been transfigured to lead when he wasn't looking then set on fire.

"Ron? Are you okay?" A small voice asked.

Ron struggled to move his head toward her direction. Rose sat on the only other bed in the room already dressed in her hospital gown. She'd been admitted two days ago for breathing problems the mediwitch overseeing her hadn't counted on. She squeezed her teddy tightly against her body as her eyes peered at him worriedly as the deep black circles under his eyes became visible. Seeing this Ron forced himself to smile and put his arms under him to push himself up.

"I'm fine. Just tired is all." Ron reassured her.

Ron grabbed his own hospital gown and moved into the bathroom that they shared. Once inside he nearly fell to his knees in exhaustion. His pain potion had worn off three days ago. A liquefied version of the pain spell they'd done his first day in. He shuddered as his hands touched the cold tile on either side of him. Ron undid his belt from the new hole he'd been forced to make when his pants refused to stay on him. His weight had dropped another four pounds in the last month and a half.

He wondered what his mother would say to him at the moment. She was always so concerned about how gangly most of her boys were. Only Charlie had taken after her slightly stocky build. An image of her chasing after him with a batch of cookies in her arms came to mind causing Ron to chuckle painfully into his hands.

Ron dragged the hospital gown and pants on before pulling himself up by the sink. Mediwitch Cecily had been kind enough to enchant his sleeves to lengthen to his fingertips after he explained his dislike

of showing his scars. Turning on the facet Ron cupped his hands, allowing cold water to fill them, before splashing his face with it. The water slid down his chest and dampened his neck line, but he hardly noticed. Taking several long deep breaths Ron finally collected himself enough to open the door and face Rose.

He smiled for her and was rewarded by the sight of her attempting to wave back while still holding on tightly to her bear friend. Ron pushed the pain and exhaustion beneath his feet in order to sit next to her on her bed. His hands still shook with a permanent tremble, but Rose had met him with it and accepted it without a word. He in turn ignored the fact that she was much too small for her age.

"Whatcha doing kiddo?" Ron asked.

"I was telling Alfred about the carnival that's coming to town in a few weeks." Rose told him.

"Ah... and what's a carnival?" Ron asked.

"It's this big party that muggles have every May and October. They get into all sorts of metal things and it swings them around!" Rose explained excitedly.

Ron was just disturbed.

"There's some that you get in that spins you around so fast that when you get out you don't even know what's up and down anymore. And then you get to eat candy! But then you usually throw it up anyways." Rose scrunched up her nose in thought as Ron gave her a bewildered and horrified look.

Muggle's did *this* at parties? He didn't care what Hermione said they would *not* be getting on anything like *that*. The thought of her caused him to feel a strong wave of longing. He missed her so much...

"And have you ever gone in one?" Ron asked in sick fascination.



"Yup! I went inside the caterpillar roller coaster and on the swings where you lifted HIGH up into the air and spun around!" Rose told him triumphantly.

"You went inside a bug?" Ron asked in disgust.

"Not a little bug. This one was like twenty times bigger than you." Rose explained.

"They don't have bugs that big... even in the wizarding world."

"Muggles do." She told him smugly.

Ron was so confused. He'd have to ask Hermione about it in his next letter.

"Ah... Mr. Weasley you're here." Dr. Blake said softly as he and Rose's mediwitch entered. "I'm gonna need you to remove your bandages from your left arm and lay down for me so that we can perform the next..." The man stilled and looked at the little girl in the bed next to Ron. "Ah... um... the next treatment." He finished.

Mediwitch, Susan (or something like that, Ron couldn't remember), motioned for Rose to take her hand. Rose's grip tightened on the bear and she looked up at Ron for reassurance. Ron smiled down at her before leaning closer.

"You can come back as soon as my treatments are done. When I wake up I'll teach you how to play exploding snaps." Ron whispered conspiratorially. Her eyes lit up with interest and she hurriedly hopped off the bed to grab Susan's hand. An image of Harry the first time he saw a chocolate frog popped into his mind and his smile widened.

"As soon as you wake up?" She questioned, looking back at him just before the pair left the room.

"Yup." Ron promised.

"Hm... I'm not patient so you'll have to wake up quick." Rose told him.

Ron smiled sadly.

"I'll try my best to wake up as soon as possible."

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Ron wrung his hands together in an attempt to rid them of the ache, though he knew it wouldn't get rid of it, the motion somehow seemed to lessen it somehow. His heavily bruised and battered left arm was uncovered for all to see. Ron avoided looking at the black and blue appendage, preferring to look Dr. Blake in the eye as he went over one of his scans.

The magical infection had accumulated near the edge of his stomach forming dark tumors that would need to be removed immediately. It was an unfortunate, but necessary risk concerning one of the dangerous potions he'd been forced to take over the last two months. It got rid of the skin that decayed and replaced it with newer skin at a faster rate than what his body normally would have. Dr. Blake explained that if his body had been left to recover at its own rate Ron's whole arm would have had to be removed. The problem with the medical potion was that there was a nine percent chance that it could cause some of the dark magic to escape and harden.

Ron breathed in and breathed out. They'd asked him to come and talk to him not long after he'd woken from the last treatment. His throat had been nearly nonexistent and so he'd been writing Rose directions as he showed her the cards. They'd been in the middle of the first round when they came in to 'talk' to him. Rose had been disappointed after waiting so long to play with him that Ron had been forced to promise her a treat when he got back.

"So..." Ron rasped. "You're gonna... what are we going to do?" Ron asked again.

"There's a ritual we can perform to rid your body of the toxic tumor." Dr. Blake said carefully.

"Toxic?" Ron said quietly.

Dr. Blake exchanged a glance with the mediwitch in the room.

"Yes... we thought that the risk level was low enough. Ninety one percent of the patients who need the sargonic potion never show complications. The toxic floods out of their system before it causes any damage like the tumor that developed inside you." Mediwitch Fay said gently. "It's so rare..." Her voice trailed off.

"Yeah... I get it. Okay..." Ron trailed off. He felt cold.

Hermione's voice whispered in his ear.

*"A Ritual is a circle of magic designed for a wide variety of spells too complicated to be performed by a single wand and requiring layers of magic similar to barrier charms. They're meant to be performed on an object or a person and often include sacrifices of some kind ranging from a drop of blood to creature sacrifice all the way up to... human sacrifice."*

Ron shivered. He felt cold. Did they give him the pain medicine charm? It didn't feel like it. His bones ached more than shivered. He wanted Hermione to be there... to hold his hand and glare fiercely at the doctor like the ant he was compared to her. He wanted Harry to put his hand on his shoulder reassuringly and lie to him about how it wouldn't be so bad. Without them everything felt incomplete.

"So how does this... this ritual work?" Ron asked.

They exchanged glances again.

"We'll put you under a numbing spell, but... the magic being performed will most likely interfere with the effectiveness of the spell. We'll give you a mouth guard and muggle medicine as a precaution.

Unfortunately that might still not be enough and you might feel some pain. You'll need to stay at the hospital for at least a week afterwards." Dr. Blake spoke up.

"And what will be the sacrificial part?" Ron asked.

They looked at him surprised for a moment before the mediwitch answered.

"The ritual requires a pint of blood from a child." At the look on Ron's face the woman held her hand up to silence him. "There is a muggle method in which they ask people to donate their blood. We take this approach. The child is completely willing. It is not harmful to the child and helps our patients."

Ron relaxed a little at that.

"So when should I come in for this?" Ron asked quietly. Resigned and exhausted he just wanted to get back to the room and show Rose a few simple spells before going to sleep.

"It will take a little less than a week to get the necessary specialist here from Italy to perform it. Like we said earlier it's very rare for this to happen to one of our patients and since it was due to Doctor Recommendation's there will be no charges on your part." Dr. Blake said smoothly.

He wondered what Hermione or Harry would say to that. They'd probably be infuriated at the insinuation that it even came under consideration that Ron would have to pay to have a problem fixed that had been caused by the doctors themselves. In fact... a few months ago he would have been too. Now though he just wanted to crawl into a bed. His head was pounding. His throat was raw. His left arm throbbed and his body ached.

They handed him a contract five or six pages long with tiny script. Ron rubbed his tired eyes as he read over them, knowing instinctively that it was important, probably something Hermione

drilled into him at some point. There was a lot of hospital jargon with phrases he used a simplifying charm to understand, but eventually he got through it. Nothing suspicious. Ron signed it, his trembling hands causing the signature to come out crookedly, before passing it to the pair.

"You'll be released later this morning. We'll be performing the ritual in place of your treatment at the end of the this week, possibly at the beginning of next week. If you feel any pain near your stomach before then please send out an emergency signal through the mark we placed on your right arm. We don't want an incident like last month do we?" Dr. Blake asked, though his voice was tinged more in warning than anything else.

Ron smiled sheepishly at the man.

"No sir."

He honestly wasn't quite sure about this Healer. One minute he seemed concerned and the next he was giving out information in the most detached voice Ron had ever heard. Then he'd be right back to being worried and stern again. Maybe being around so many dying people all the time did something to you. Made you want to be involved, but not get hurt. The problem was that you can't have one without the other.

When he walked into the shared room Ron was surprised to find Rose fast asleep in her bed. Then he became unsurprised at the sight of the clock: two in the morning. He hadn't realized... Mary would be there in two hours. Ron pulled the covers over her before going over to his own and snuggling into the large white pillow. Something poked him. Ron shrieked, vey manly like of course mind you, before pulling out the stuffed bear. Shaking his head in amusement Ron got up from his bed to place Alfred beside Rose. The pale, frail looking child murmured softly and fidgeted when Ron's fingers traced her cheek as he withdrew his hand.

It worried him a bit, how attached he'd gotten to the little girl, but it couldn't be helped now. He already made it clear to her that unlike her treatment there was a strong possibility he would die. He knew that she understood what the words meant, especially since she herself was sick, but he wondered if she really comprehended the concept. Her father had passed away when she was just a baby so the raw pain that came with losing someone wasn't there.

His teeth clicked together as another shiver ran through his body. Ron moved to his bed and crawled under the covers. Hugging the pillow to him and laying his head down causing his entire body to sag in relief. He honestly couldn't believe that standing could ever be so *exhausting*. Then again he didn't think he'd even be able to stand after one of his treatments and here he was walking to an office... admittedly just down the hall. It was still impressive.

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Pig fluttered around Hermione's room excitedly as he dodged Crookshanks claws. Hermione honestly didn't understand why Ron couldn't take care of his silly bird. Her boyfriend had sent the small creature to her weeks ago with a note begging her to take care of him for a while. The ditzy little thing irritated her to no end, but she'd been delighted in the fact that she had something that screamed Ron in their apartment. The little owl also forced Crookshanks to exercise.

She dropped her bag onto her bed and removed her gloves to warm her hands in front of her conjured fire. Five days in France had taught her a lot. The first and foremost: She should have studied a foreign language of some kind. She needed to brush up on that. If she could just pick up a few get me by phrases in each language she wouldn't end up lost in Lyon when she should have been in Nancy. Hermione stretched out like her cat, enjoying the satisfying pops that sounding through the room.

Without warning the doors to their apartment burst open. Hermione twirled around, wand raised at the ready, eyes turning hard. Staring

back at her were bright green eyes. Hermione lowered her wand with a shaky breath.

"Harry don't do that to me." Hermione told him sternly.

Harry didn't even pause as he strolled into the room and handed her a sheet of paper.

"Trelawney's made another prediction." Harry told her. The young witch paled as she took the page into her own hands. "I've informed Shacklebot and McGonagal already."

Hermione read the piece of paper quietly before setting it down the kitchen counter. Her eyes scanned it again and again and even as Harry began pouring himself a cup of coffee she was pulling out several books and cracking them open.

"Harry?" Hermione said absentmindedly.

"Yeah?"

"Get Shacklebot to send me information on wizarding families during the first war and their histories concerning it."

"Alright."

---

When Ron entered the lecture hall for strategy training he made his way over to Traux and sat down beside him. So far Traux was still the only friend he'd made in the group of snot nosed green brats. Ron had learned that none of them had gotten any actual experience with the things they talked about in class. The physical training they had was made up of simulations. They were shooting fairly safe spells at each other and if you got hit you were 'dead.' It also included endurance, flexibility, and strength training.

He wanted to scoff at them. He and Harry sparred with more dangerous spells all the time. More than once they'd accidentally

knocked each other out. Ron grimaced as he remembered the time they'd hunted for food during the Horcrux hunt and he nearly blasted Harry to pieces...

Maybe safer spells were a good thing.

Still... Care of Magical Creatures class was more dangerous than what they performed here. That might be questioning Hagrid's teaching styles more than anything though. Mr. Lance liked to go through the motions of strategies he and his students created until they were so engrained in their brains that the students wouldn't forget to use them when they faced the real thing. Ron could understand that.

"Ron! How you doing mate?" Traux asked, turning away from one of their female classmates that had been flirting with him.

The girl gave Ron a look of distaste, from his wonderful status or the fact that Traux was more interested in talking to him than her, he didn't know. Ron couldn't help, but smirk. There was no doubt that Traux was interested. From what Ron had learned of the slightly older man he greatly enjoyed flirting with women but, like his brother Fred, he liked the women to think he wasn't interested. *"Makes it more fun mate."*

"Fine." Ron answered pulling the long sleeve of his thick hoodie down further to hide the bandages that peeked out. His Gryffindor gloves covered the bandages that wrapped around his left hand easily, but it did earn him odd stares.

"Are you going to watch the training again today?" Traux asked.

"It's a simulation on facing a troll right?" Ron asked.

Traux nodded.

"Eh... I guess. Mary closed the shop today since her manager is on vacation and she's at the hospital with her daughter."



"You guess? Mate it's going to be awesome. Mr. Lance has even managed to get a wizard whose part troll to help us out." Traux said excitedly.

"Half breeds really have nothing on the real thing." Ron told him.

It was like comparing Hagrid to his half-brother Grawp or those giants that attacked Hogwarts. Ridiculously different.

"Oh and I suppose you've faced a troll before then?" Traux asked teasingly.

"When I was twelve me and my two best friends faced one when it got into our school. It had us cornered in the bathroom." Ron told him smirking. It was fun to brag a little here and there. He couldn't do that at Hogwarts because everyone already knew about what he, Harry and Hermione did.

"You're lying." Traux said, paling slightly.

The girl who had been beside him turned toward him as well. In fact it felt like more than a few eyes were on him.

"Nope. We were really lucky though. Hermione was in the stall when it barged in and destroyed them all. Hermione crawled under the stalls and beneath the sinks and that's where we saw her when we came in. The thing grabbed Harry and picked him up by his foot. Hermione instructed me in how to perform a spell that lifted the club out of its hand and dropped it on the things head, but not before Harry went for a nasty ride and got his wand shoved up the things nose. Nasty that was." Ron told him.

"You're full of shit." A student called out. Ron shrugged. A small part of him wanted to snap at the guy, but his exhaustion stopped him. Irritability caused by the medicine had worn down horribly on his temper, but exhaustion from the treatments wore down everything else. He just didn't care anymore... about anything really. It was hard even pretending to Rose that everything was 'wonderful.'

"Wow Ron. Pretty scary. Twelve huh?" Traux said, ignoring the other students.

"Eh... you don't really think about how scary something is until afterwards."

Mr. Lance walked into the room then. He sat up straighter, flexing his fingers to get the numbness to go away and pulling the extra large hoodie closer to him. Another dose of the pain reliever. There was no end to the torrent of looks he got from wearing a coat in Australia during late September, but he wasn't about to explain why. The looks he would get from *that* would be even worse.

"Today we're going to be talking about how to handle a wizard who is using his house elf as an accomplice in crime. There are several strategies that can be used to quickly and efficiently take down a house elf." Mr. Lance began.

Ron cringed. Clearly he wouldn't be telling Hermione or Harry about this particular lesson. Losing all enthusiasm Ron sunk low in his chair.

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Harry Potter wanted nothing more than to put his hands over his ears and pretend as if the dozens of people around him shouting his name didn't exist. He wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back to the Burrow where he wasn't being hounded, but he had a job to do. Harry marched through the reporters and random strangers that wished to 'talk' to him as he entered the ministry.

The eyes followed him when they couldn't physically go after him into the offices. Heaving a huge sigh of relief as the elevator doors closed he tried to focus on his objective. He was meeting with the other trainees for a simulation. He didn't even know what the simulation was on. He'd missed it because he'd been asked to go after another leftover. Death Eater last night with Hermione. The two of them had been pouring over the required learned spells for all the

training they were missing when they'd been dragged from their study by the head Auror's Patronus.

Harry ran a hand through his hair. Hermione's partnered simulation would be in the afternoon. If they didn't do well they would be asked to stay after for extra training before being sent out on another mission later that night. They were going to highly deserve their week off in the upcoming days.

The doors to the elevator opened and Harry hurriedly exited it to get away from the prying eyes in the cramped square box. He wished Ron were here to tell them all off. But he wasn't and Harry would have to deal with that. He could see him up ahead leaning against the wall. His partner was a young man with light brown hair and small brown eyes which blinked too much. He was short and a little on the chunky side, but his build was sturdy. Harry hadn't talked to the man more than once and had a hard time believing that they'd work well together because of that.

It was Kingsley's gentle way of trying to get him and Hermione to work with other people. Unfortunately since they didn't share much training time together and even less talking it made things more difficult than helpful. Harry grimaced as he realized belatedly that he had no clue what the guy's name was.

The young man straightened the moment his eyes darted over to Harry's approaching footsteps. Just as the times before the man tried glancing at his scar through Harry's tangled bangs before looking him in the eyes.

"Mr. Potter! An honor to be working with you... should we discuss strategy?" The man asked excitedly.

And all Harry could think of was how much he wanted Ron or Hermione to be there instead of this man whose name he didn't even know. ALL of the other trainees were so thrilled to be working beside him. ALL the other trainees wanted to ask question after question about him. ALL the other trainees thought he was amazing and

heroic. He should be flattered and gracious. He should just indulge them and be nice. That's what he told himself each time before walking into the room.

They wanted to know him because he was a hero who they thought was amazing.

Would they think he was still amazing if they got to know him though?

What would they think if he told them he just wanted them all to shut up and leave him alone?

What if he explained to this young man in front of him that he was fighting exhaustion because he'd woken up the last three nights from nightmares that left him shaking? That Hermione had been over at the Burrow helping Mrs. Weasley and slept over so he'd lay awake contemplating going over there just so he wouldn't be alone?

What if he told this guy in front of him what he really wanted to? That Ron could come up with better strategies than him. That Hermione could outwit him ten out of ten times. That he didn't need to discuss strategies with *them* because they already *knew* .

He wanted nothing more than to wrinkle his nose at this... *stranger*. He wanted to turn around and wait for Hermione to come. He wanted to laugh in the man's face hysterically and ask him what *he* knew about strategy because every god damn plan that they'd ever come up with always blew up in their faces. Life was too unpredictable for a simple plan. You needed to know and trust the people around explicitly. That was what was important.

Harry stared at the guy for several long moments as these thoughts ran through his mind. The young man began to fidget nervously under his sharp, green eyes. He shook himself firmly out of those thoughts. Clearly it wasn't this man's fault and being mean to him would only make him feel better for a second and guilty for the rest

of his life. Harry inwardly scolded himself and blamed it on the lack of sleep.

Smiling weakly at the man Harry nodded in agreement. The tension in the room dissipated immediately and the man brightened again.

He really hoped the guy said his name at some point in the conversation.

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George Weasley flipped the sign on the front of the joke shop to 'Closed for lunch' before locking up the place and muttering a guarding enchantment. He turned to where he knew Fred would be... but managed to stop himself just in time from embarrassing himself again.

Fred was gone.

*Fred was gone.*

He wouldn't be there.

No one was going to be there.

George allowed himself a moment where he simply stood in the street telling himself this before heading on his way. It was a step. It had taken him a while to force himself *not* to look back for his brother. So many occasions he found himself simply waiting for him. In the mornings he would find himself impatiently sitting downstairs for someone who wouldn't be coming down. He found himself leaving the joke shop unlocked because it was *Fred's* night to close up so why would *he* worry about it?

He never imagined continuing life without his twin.

The idea of death had always been as they'd come into life; together. If they died it would have been together. Never had he imagined that one of them would die while the other lived. Which was silly, of

course, they were two people with two individual bodies. Yet it didn't feel as if his brother had died, but rather half his brain and half his heart had been ripped out. He couldn't function right without his left side.

George had spent countless nights screaming his lungs out to the sky after placing a silencing charm around the room. It left him raw and empty, but felt so much better than the pain that wanted to consume him. He hadn't even been there when he died... Percy and Ron had been.

The irony.

Overprotective Percy who'd been too stubborn to admit he was wrong and because of it missed the last few years of their lives. Percy who had screamed in pain and horror because the night he'd finally realized what he'd missed and what he'd done he had lost the chance to make up for it. Percy who clung on to Fred's body because he didn't want to accept that he'd failed to protect him even after coming back to do just that for his family.

Little, oversensitive Ron who always wanted to be part of their duo, but who ended up finding his own little trio. Ron who, though neither twin would ever admit it, managed to cause more chaos with Harry and Hermione than the twins ever accomplished. Ron who'd been practically dragged away by Harry and Hermione to complete their task.

The two who George and Fred pranked and teased mercilessly throughout their childhood. The two that had witnessed Fred's death when George had been held up by a pair of death eaters. The two who for months now were trying to help him past everything. Percy had been taking his lunch hour off early in the morning to spend time with him. Ron had been sending him letter after letter with lighthearted stories about his time in Australia. They were both going out of their way to make sure he didn't feel alone.

George pulled his light coat tighter around him as he moved onto a street a few blocks from Diagon Alley where he was meeting Hermione. It was a little loose on him. The coat. He'd been eating less in the last few months, much to his mother's chagrin. He didn't have the want really. He didn't have an appetite anymore for anything. It all seemed slightly pointless at times. Sitting in the kitchen all alone with whatever he scraped up from the cupboards. Sometimes... when he was all alone staring at the opposite side of the table... he saw Fred sitting across from him. His twin was always scowling at him, looking pointedly at the half eaten plate. The image would only disappear when he'd finished all of it.

It worried him, these delusions, more so that he was so desperate to see them. It didn't just happen when he didn't eat. He saw Fred everywhere. He'd look over his shoulder and would see his brother giving him that wolfish grin of his. Fred's image would be in the shop sometimes or at the Burrow. Sometimes he was the Fred that had died... sometimes younger.

Each time one of his family members or friends, even strangers in the streets, would shake him when he stopped and stared at the nonexistent vision. Then he'd get *those* looks. The ones that said he wasn't the only one worried about what he saw.

Harry was in yet another meeting with Shacklebot concerning one of the team's he lead. Hermione hadn't bothered with going because Harry would brief her once he got out. Apparently the two of them were working on a new 'project' sanctioned by the minister as top priority.

Knowing this it came as no surprise when he walked into the little Café to see his brother's girlfriend busily scribbling notes amongst a large pile of documents. Smiling fondly at the young woman George sat down at the table and nearly chuckled when he realized that Hermione hadn't noticed him at all yet. Snickering a little to him-self George moved behind his victim and placed his cold hands at the nape of her bare neck.

"BAM!"

An elbow slammed into the front of his face. George stumbled back with a loud yelp holding his bleeding, stinging nose. Shock filled him when his eyes opened to find a wand pointing at his neck and fierce brown eyes glaring at him. There was a moment of tense silence before Hermione's eyes widened in recognition. Her arms lowered immediately.

"Oh George! I'm so sorry." Hermione said rushing forward to help the stunned Weasley. "But you know you kinda deserved it." She told him as she grabbed a napkin from the table and wiped the blood away. "That wasn't very nice at all."

" 'Al af to remember you 'ave a wicked elbow swing." George muttered.

"Yes well... Harry and Ron aren't too kind to people who sneak up on them either." Hermione explained quietly.

"Aww." George said in understanding.

He'd heard of the trio's famous paranoia from their mum Molly. He, of course, had seen the way the three looked behind their shoulder's every once in a while and who could miss the way they sometimes snuck into each other's rooms at night that past summer. He distinctly remembered Charlie being blasted out the front door after his dragon caring brother attempted to wake the trio up.

Charlie still claimed he didn't know which one did it.

"Hold Still." Hermione said sternly, taking out her wand.

George moved his hands away from his face as the young woman tapped the wand against her temples a few times in concentration before she apparently remembered something. Humming to herself Hermione pointed the wand directly at his face and before he could



let out a word a spell shout out and hit him. George sighed in relief as he felt his nose moving into place.

"It will still bleed for a little bit, but the bones corrected now." Hermione told him.

"Thank you." George said sincerely as he retook his seat.

*'Note to self: Don't sneak up on any of them again. Think long range Georgie... long range.'*

They ordered lunch but, much to George's amusement, Hermione spent most of the time during their wait time with her nose in a document. He imagined if Ron were there he'd be rolling his eyes at him with an exasperated expression on his face. Harry would be smiling sheepishly to the side. It was always so much fun to see the three of them interacting. It was what he thought he and Fred must have looked like.

"So is that the 'project' Harry mentioned?" George asked curiously.

Hermione looked up from her work, pushing a strand of hair out of her face, before glancing at the papers.

"Oh... yes they... it is. I'm looking up all pure-blood families and everything they did during the first war against Voldemort." Hermione said absently. "The information we got suggested that the person came from a 'rebellious pure blood family,' but determining who was rebellious against him and who was not is turning out to be a great deal more difficult than I first imagined."

"Well... why don't you talk to mum and dad. The Weasley's were most definitely 'rebellious' during the first war so they would probably know all sorts of family's along those lines." George said thoughtfully.

Hermione tapped her wand lightly against the table in thought.

"That's a good idea. There are hundreds of pureblood families and the height of Voldemort's first reign is highly debated. I'm not even sure if some of these families are still around. Talking to someone from that time and a pureblood could be very useful." Hermione said thoughtfully.

A couple walked into the Café then with hands intertwined. George noticed that Hermione's eyes followed them to their seat. The waitress came with their food then and George picked up the delicious chicken sandwich and began eating with relish.

"So..." George said thoughtfully through his food. "What exactly is this information you got?"

Hermione hesitated for a moment.

He hated that.

How secretive Harry, Hermione and even his brother Ron were. As if they didn't trust them... him despite everything. They didn't seem to trust anyone but each other. Harry and Hermione he could sort of understand, but from Ron it hurt. Fred had once commented bitterly that 'the Weasleys' had become Ron's second family. He hadn't agreed with Fred then, but now it seemed as if that statement was true.

"Harry caught Trelawny having another vision." Hermione said carefully. "It was about someone who was in death's hold. The prophecy talked about death being 'removed' before it was too late."

"And this person is from a pureblood family who was against Voldemort?" George contemplated.

"We think it may be alluding to something bigger... considering her last two prophecies." Hermione said absentmindedly.

The couple from before moved closer before sharing a soft kiss. He watched as Hermione's eyes glanced at them, straying for a few

moments, before her attention came back to him. George smiled knowingly at her.

"You miss him." George said smugly.

"Don't be a prat. Of course I do." Hermione replied curtly.

That took George slightly by surprise. A year ago one would be hard pressed to get Hermione or Ron to admit they liked each other. It was yet another example of how much all three of them had grown in their hunt for the Hocruxes. It was sad to him that they'd lost some of their more childish behaviors. Truly the three had been forced to grow up much too fast.

"You and Harry have off all next week right? Shackbot finally came to his senses and gave you two time off. Why don't you head down to where Ron's been hold up and visit him?" George asked.

"George... oh... we can't. We already promised Andromeda that we'd take Teddy next week." Hermione said tiredly.

"So take the little tyke with you. The nyph would surely love Australia for a week and seeing Uncle Ronniekins." George said mischievously.

"He's not even one yet." Hermione deadpanned.

"All the better. Not old enough to be capable of tattling on you two." George laughed.

"Well... I suppose I could see what Harry and Ron think." Hermione muttered.

"That a girl!" George said happily.

Afterwards George dragged himself back to his quiet and lonely shop.

---

He shivered. It had been two days since the last lecture from Mr. Lance and the man had decided they needed a breath of fresh air for this lecture. Ron glared dejectedly at the ground. What would normally feel like a cool, refreshing breeze felt more like a December chill in London to his already cold skin. His magic had been too unstable that morning so he'd decided it would be safer to go on foot, but the walk was so *long* and he hadn't been able to keep his food down from breakfast and he'd worked last night... He just wanted to curl up and sleep.

The other students had been giving him looks since they'd gotten outside. Their stares had slowly been getting worse since he'd started losing weight and he knew that they'd figured out something was wrong with him. It didn't help that he'd missed three regular lectures the last two weeks alone on top of missing the physical training.

Ron didn't care. He was cold, tired and felt as if his body was made from cement. He couldn't move his left arm again either. It was like the entire limb was paralyzed. He'd practically dropped to his knees when they'd been told to sit down. They were talking about defensive spells and how to integrate them into a strategy when facing superior opponents. The man, Mr. Lance, was very fond of saying; *Outwitting your opponent depends on being able to come up with as many possible answers and then having the ability to know which one is best!*

The lecture lasted quite awhile and Ron found it harder and harder to focus on the Auror's words. Traux sat beside him paying rapt attention. When his back flared up in pain he fought hard to make his body rigid instead of doubling over. He stopped listening to the man as he focused on his breathing instead.

The acid like pain he'd become so familiar with seemed to explode deep in his back. The pain medication simply wasn't enough sometimes. Ron grit his teeth, his hand steadying him, eyes tightly closed. His breath came out shaky. His entire body shuddered.

"Mr. Weasley! Do you need me to take you to the hospital?" Mr. Lance's voice asked sternly from directly in front of him.

When did he get there?

Ron slowly shook his head. Another tremble ran through his body. He gasped, his entire body leaning forward as he tried to not fall over.

"Do you need us to do anything for you mate?" Traux's voice sounded from beside him.

Ron opened his eyes to see that he was surrounded by the entire class. Students stared at him wearily with distant concern and uncertainty. Ron breathed in slowly before shaking his head again.

"Mr. Traux, would you mind escorting Mr. Weasley inside the building to our infirmary?" Mr. Lance asked.

His entire body shuddered at the thought of moving. He tried to say as much, but only a croaked whisper of what he wanted to speak came through. He shook his head repeatedly doubling over all the way now as the pain continued.

Someone, Traux he assumed, tried to get him to his feet, but the forced movement caused Ron to cry out in pain. The person moved away quickly. He breathed in deeply, shaking his head again slowly, hoping they'd get the message. He felt bodies moving around him, but since he closed his eyes again he couldn't see them. The minutes seemed to stretch for a long time, but eventually the pain died down.

Opening his eyes again Ron shakily looked around to see many of the other trainees had left. Many stood in the background watching him carefully. Mr. Lance stood with a wizard he didn't recognize, talking in rushed whispers while periodically looking over at him. Ron sighed. When someone unexpectedly touched his back Ron flinched. He felt his right arm attempt to instinctively lash out, but

being so weak he only managed to lift it slightly. Looking in the direction of the person he saw Traux sheepishly giving him a little wave.

"Sorry mate, didn't mean to startle you like that." Traux said softly.

Ron nodded mutely, breathing deeply to calm his frayed nerves.

"It's okay." Ron told him, slowly getting to his feet.

Traux kept his hand at his back and his other in front of Ron as if he was afraid he'd collapse.

"I'm fine. It happens a lot. Nothing to worry about." Ron told him shortly.

"It's never happened during class before." Traux pointed out, far from satisfied by Ron's answer.

"Not one that bad, but they have." Ron told him with a shrug.

The young man looked disgruntled and stunned at this announcement. Traux crossed his arms, giving Ron a disapproving scan, before his eyes moved toward Mr. Lance and the other wizard.

"Look mate... Ron, there's been something I've been meaning to talk to you about. You coming to class and working when you're sick..." Traux started.

"Mr. Weasley!" Mr. Lance called as the man began walking towards them.

Ron turned away from his friend to face the approaching men, unsure if he was happy that Traux was interrupted, or nervous that the Auror wanted to talk to him. Giving Traux an apologetic smile he walked towards them and stopped before the man's deep green eyes. Mr. Lance's eyes were kind, but stern. They reminded Ron of Lupin's.

"Are you alright Mr. Weasley?" Mr. Lance asked.

"Fine sir, I'm sorry about interrupting your lecture." Ron told him sincerely. He cringed as he saw the man's eyes stare knowingly at him, an almost pitying look shining through. The man had warned him before he started attending that if he interrupted lessons or if the man saw it caused Ron too much stress he would be removed from them. Ron had huffed at the time. Listening to lectures wasn't exactly stressful. At least that's what he'd thought back then...

"Mr. Weasley... I think it would be best if you stopped coming to my classes. Focus on getting better instead of your career." Mr. Lance said softly, kindly. "You're very bright. You're welcome back whenever you've recovered."

Ron felt something inside his heart crunch at those words. He pulled his large jacket closer to him.

"Please... if I promise to only come when I'm feeling really good can I still just... at least attend a few classes." Ron bargained.

"And what would be the point of that exactly?" Mr. Lance asked sternly, but not unkindly.

"I don't want to get too far behind. Please. I know I can do this." Ron said softly.

Mr. Lance ran his hand through his thinning hair, looking toward and meeting the eyes of the man beside him, before turning back to him. His eyes narrowed, skin crinkling as he examined Ron carefully.

"One more time something like this happens and that's it." The man said slowly.

Ron saw it in his eyes though. Mr. Lance expected it to happen. He was giving Ron a tiny bit more rope when he knew the rest of the mountainside was several hundred feet. Ron gritted his teeth and

closed his eyes in frustration. He could do this. He'd just have to prove the man wrong that was all.

"Thank you sir." Ron told him.

Traux had an uneasy smile on his face when Ron walked up to him.

"Why don't I apparate us to your apartment mate? You look about ready to drop."

Ron wanted nothing more than to glare at him and tell him he could do it himself and that fact almost made him laugh. He *hated* it when people made inferences that he couldn't do something, like he was a child they needed to take care of. But the sad horrible truth was that he knew damn well he couldn't apparate anymore. He didn't even think he'd be able to walk home at that moment. So instead he swallowed his pride and gave Traux a grateful smile.

"Alright, but just because you walked me to my door doesn't mean you're getting anything." Ron joked, trying for a grin and failing.

Traux rolled his eyes.

"Sorry mate... nothing short of a blonde is gonna get my attention. Redheads are an eyesore."

"Watch it."

"Just saying... it's even worse when they have freckles."

"You're an arse."

"Take my arm eyesore."

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*... Harry and I are going to have all of next week off. We we're wondering if we could come visit you with Teddy? I know you said you're apartment's small, but we've stayed in worse than a small apartment haven't we? It would be just lovely to see you... we've*



*been apart for so long... in fact we've never spent this much time apart since we've met. Harry and I can't wait to see you! Teddy misses his Uncle Ron too.*

*-Hermione*

' *Shit. Shit. Shit!*' Ron thought as he stared at the end of the letter.

Standing up Ron rushed into the bathroom to see if he could get away with them visiting. Looking at his reflection Ron flinched. His clothes were hanging off of him prominently showing the weight loss. He was pale and he'd developed dark circles around his eyes that made them look bigger than was natural. His bandaged arm had blood spots all over it and his body felt like it was made out of bricks.

'*There's no way in bloody hell I'm pulling this off...*' Ron thought in panic.

His magic was becoming more and more unstable as the treatment went on. Even if he did perform a glamor spell of some kind it probably wouldn't last more than half an hour. Then there was the fact that his illness was getting worse. There had been several times the last month when Ron *couldn't* get out of bed. He'd attempted, boy had he, but only ended up on the floor for several hours with his body being wracked with pain. What if that happened while they were there? It would scare them.

Ron turned and walked into his living room/bedroom and grimaced. It was ten feet by ten feet and the kitchen was even smaller. There was a barely adequate bathroom and no closet at all. It wasn't just small... it was *tiny*. It wasn't like he could afford anything bigger, not with medical bills on top of everything. He'd lied a bit to them about how well he was doing... they had the impression that he was doing just fine with bills. Appearing to live in an apartment reminiscent of a drug addict or about to be homeless person was *not* 'just fine with bills.' Ron hadn't cared when he scoped it out because he knew he'd be spending most of his time in the hospital or at work. The idea of

others visiting hadn't even crossed his mind. The image had always been of him visiting them.

And the healers could call him in at any time next week for the ritual. What would he do then?

Ron moved his fingers through his hair nervously as he tried not to panic. If they saw this then they would know something was up. Not to mention... his refrigerator was nearly empty. It was always nearly empty nowadays. There were potion medication bottles everywhere. He could clean it up and hide it but with how tiny the apartment was the possibility of them finding it would be higher than he'd like to think about. What if they caught him taking medicine and really did think he'd gotten into drugs? Good grief that would be a nightmare.

Not to mention he only had the bare minimal for one person to live there; one blanket, one set of utensils, a plate and cup, one pillow, one bed, a table, a couch. He'd actually transfigured the three seater couch into a love seat to save room. There was no way that three adults and a *baby* could stand to be there for a week.

If they came they would know. There was no getting around that. Harry and Hermione were smart and no amount of glamor and hiding was going to cover all of this up. And what if they wanted a tour of the town? He could barely make it to work and back because of exhaustion. And he had treatments and work and he still sat in on the classes at Strategy training... He couldn't miss any of that.

The letter had *asked* if they could come, but it wasn't a question. Hermione was only being polite. She knew he would say yes. And he would have... if he wasn't sick. He missed her so much. He wanted to hold her and drag her against him so he could feel her hair against his cheek. He wanted to pull her into a kiss and never break it. He wanted them to sit at his couch and talk to him. He wanted to play chess with Harry as they told him in person about what was going on in England. He wanted Harry to cook dinner because, damn it, he and Hermione sucked at cooking and it would be nice to have a home cooked meal.

That wasn't quite true. When they'd been traveling Harry had taught him how to cook a few things. Hermione never got the hang of it though. She burned everything. An image of her flustered face over the smoking biscuits they'd managed to get ahold of from a nearby town came to mind and he found himself chuckling even as he slid to the floor in his small apartment staring at the letter.

He remembered embracing her from behind and gently taking the burnt biscuits from her and going outside to toss them. When he came back in she was on the bed with frustrated tears brimming at the corners of her eyes. But she wouldn't let them fall. Not his Hermione. He brought her close then and told her that she wasn't allowed in the kitchen anymore and that she'd just have to stick to freeing house elves and making sure werewolves weren't discriminated against. She'd giggled into his shoulder before wiping the corner of her eyes and breathing in deeply against him. Then she got up and fixed her clothes before promptly handing him the rest of the cooking materials and going back to researching something or other concerning the hocruxes.

He wondered what they were doing then. Hermione said that they were working on a new 'project' that she'd tell him about when they got there. The information was too fragile to allow any chance of getting into enemy hands. So Kingsley was loading them up with Auror duties already? It both surprised him and didn't. The ministry was practically in pieces and Shacklebot had been asking them to perform odd jobs here and there all summer.

Ron pressed the paper to his forehead as he tried to think of what to do. He obviously couldn't let them come, but... he missed them so much. He didn't think it would be this hard. The treatment yes, but the yearning... he had no idea. His thoughts were filled with his girlfriend and best friend constantly. Everywhere he went he wondered what Harry and Hermione would think of it. Everything he did he wondered what they were doing. He desperately wanted them more than anyone else when he was undergoing his treatments.

*'What's stopping you?' His mind whispered. 'You could have them both here with you, you know. All you have to do is tell them and they'd drop everything to be there for you. You know they would.'*

The paper fell from Ron's hands as he pressed them over his ears. His entire body was shaking uncontrollably now. He couldn't do that to them. They were already working all the time... they didn't need to go out of their way to help him. He could take care of himself. He'd been doing *fine* by himself after all.

Well... maybe not fine but he'd been *okay*.

It wasn't too bad.

He wanted them there, but he didn't *need* them there.

It was selfish to even think of telling them.

If they found out they would insist on him moving back and doing treatment in England. They'd do everything in their power to help him including putting their careers and lives on hold. They were both stupidly selfless. He couldn't let them do that, couldn't let them know, couldn't let them down. He had to be stronger than this.

Ron carefully got up off the floor and began writing his reply to Hermione. He wrote slowly so that his shaking hands wouldn't ruin what he had to say.

## Dread Ch7

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

A/N: Thank you very much for all the encouragement and prayers concerning my lil sis. She's up and about again doing just fine.

-Eh... Okay so... I actually already had this chapter written a long time ago. Like I said before everything's pretty much complete. The thing is though when I went to put it up a few weeks ago... large chunks of the chapter was gone. Just... pages upon pages of work was just not there. I'm not gonna lie I was really angry. The only thing I can think of as a means of explanation would be that over the Christmas break my computer was attacked by a series of viruses. I've checked out all my other documents. Whole chapters are missing from works like Accidental Companions and A Prisoner's Silence. Other stories I haven't put up aren't there anymore. One of my original stories was completely wiped out as well (20 pages rough drafting an entire book! Die Viruses DIE!). Most of Stay Standing is safe but I wanted to explain why it is I haven't updated in a while. I had to rewrite a lot of stuff from memory concerning a chapter I wrote a while ago.

From what I can tell all my documents were forced into recovery mode, you know where you back up your computer to a certain date? Well all my documents say random dates from several months ago (All different dates oddly enough) when I KNOW I updated them many times after those dates. The ones that were erased (I'm assuming at least) were put at a recovery date were they didn't exist. Not so fun.

-An odd thing I've noticed when it comes to Ron and Harry... Harry is the only one throughout the books that Ron seems to shrink away from arguing against. Every fight they've had Ron just seems to back down like a kicked dog instead of yelling back till he can't talk

anymore like he does with everyone else. The only time he didn't was when he wore the locket. Has anyone else noticed this?

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"During chemo, you're more tired than you've ever been. It's like a cloud passing over the sun, and suddenly you're out. You don't know how you'll answer the door when your groceries are delivered. But you also find that you're stronger than you've ever been. You're clear. Your mortality is at optimal distance, not up so close that it obscures everything else, but close enough to give you depth perception. Previously, it has taken you weeks, months, or years to discover the meaning of an experience. Now it's instantaneous."

By: Melissa Bank

## Chapter 7: Dread

*He had always felt that patience was the most important trait when it came to dealing with children. Right behind that was humor. You had to be able to laugh at the silly things your children did rather than get upset about it. Luckily he had both of these characteristics. His wife often beseeched Merlin to 'give me just a spot of what he's got' before she would take a breath and head out to the battlefield held by the boys in the living room. Those words kindled his soul with warmth and pride.*

*He would then wait a moment or two till Molly had given the children her breath of calm yet powerful warning before heading out behind her to put his aura behind hers. A show of support to say 'that's enough now children.' Most of the time it worked, but for those occasions when it didn't Molly's 'spot' of patients would wear then and she'd bark out orders like a General at war. He loved her for that. She was his passionate storm in full swing and he the sails that was carried through by her winds. When she finally calmed down she would glance back at him in exasperation as if to say 'I could probably have used just a spot more dear.'*

*He would smile back and then they'd allow the children to realize they'd gone overboard for a minute. Then they would pout a bit and move out of the room to calm down. He and Molly would then split off. He would handle Bill, Charlie, Percy and Fred while she would deal with George, Ron and Ginny. Bill and Percy were easy enough... They had enough patients to wait until he was finished with Charlie and Fred. They had a bit of a system going, he and Molly, when it came to dealing with the children.*

*He would always talk to Charlie first because his temper was easily the worst and most readily destructive. Molly would talk to George first because he was the calmer, more rational twin and if Fred was going to do anything he'd wait for George. George would almost always get to Fred first so when Arthur talked to him it was easier. Molly would then talk to Ginny because the little spitfire would try to start an argument if left alone for too long. By then he'd be talking to Percy because if you left him for more than a short period of time he would no longer be willing to talk about it at all. He would close off.*

*After all that Molly would then wonder upstairs to deal with Ron. When Ron was angry or hurt he just wanted to be left alone no matter if it was recent or not. Arthur would be in Bill's room around the same time Molly made it up to Ronnie. His oldest would be fiddling with something and avoid looking at him. He'd have an irritated frown on his face, but his eyes wouldn't really be seeing the object.*

*This time around Bill had been arguing with Percy about something. Quite unusual for them. The twins had been egging them on while standing to the side. Ginny had been screaming at the twins to stop while Charlie had been arguing with Ron in the corner. Ronnie had tears in his eyes. That didn't really surprise him much. Charlie was Ron's idol. Ron never argued with Charlie. From what he gathered from Charlie about the situation Percy had said something (though none of his children would tell him what) to Ron. It had started a yelling match between them and then Ron's temper had gotten the better of him. He punched Percy in the chest.*

*Bill and Charlie had separated them, but only managed to turn one argument into two.*

*Arthur sat at the end of his son's bed as he waited for Bill to focus on him. When the young man looked up Arthur smiled comfortingly.*

*" Fatherhood not treating you so good son?" Arthur joked lightly.*

*It had become a running joke between them that Ron and Ginny saw Bill more as a second father than as a big brother because the age difference was so great. Unlike what he would normally do though, give a small smile, Bill wrinkled his nose in disgruntlement.*

*" I don't know what's going on Dad." Bill said honestly. There was a great deal of irritation in his voice and strangely there was hurt.*

*" They don't... tell me things anymore. None of them do. They see me as another parent... someone to go to, to tattle on the others or seek advise even, but I'm not one of them. They act like I'm not apart of their group.... Well not group... but... I mean... Do you know what I mean?" Bill asked looking up at him hopefully.*

*Arthur moved closer and fondly ran his fingers once through Bill's hair. Pulling back Arthur looked up toward the ceiling in thought.*

*No... he didn't understand. He only had two brothers. A relatively normal sized family with children of relative ages. Bill's childhood was immensely different from his. He'd been the youngest of the three brothers and only a year apart at that. He would try to understand though... because that was really the best he could offer his son.*

*" You feel isolated. Not one of the adults but not one of the children either?" Arthur questioned softly.*

*His eighteen year old looked forlornly out into a place he couldn't see. He would be leaving soon to start his training as a curse breaker.*



*" Sort of, but it's always been this way with them. I just want to take care of them, watch out for them, but when I try I'm just 'Big Brother Bill Bossing Brothers and Baby's Because he's Boring.'" Bill cried out in exasperation.*

*Arthur suppressed a smile at the twin's old jibe. Bill needed him to be serious right now.*

*" But Nooooo," Bill snarled. "Big brothers are supposed to be cool and let them get away with things like Charlie."*

*" You know that's just the twins trying to convince you to let them get away with things." Arthur said with a chuckle.*

*Bill leaned against his too small bed frame with an unamused air.*

*" No... their right. All of my friends say the same thing. They say I act more like a parent than a big brother. I'm a stick in the mud. I know I am, but... it's just depressing. I know I'm not ever going to be like them and I can deal with that. But I also know that when I leave I won't ever be close to them again. That's what I can't handle." Bill admitted.*

*" That's not true." Arthur told Bill adamantly. "My brother's and I may not live close, but I'm still able to talk to them as if it were twenty or thirty years ago."*

*Bill sighed and shook his head.*

*" It's different for me Dad. I don't think I can really explain it. They love me... and if something were to ever happen I know they would be there, but it's not the same as being close to them. There's too much of a gap. Me and Charlie are close... Even Perce and I can relate a lot. The twins though... and Ronnie and Ginny... There's just too much there, too much time."*

*Arthur was saddened by it, but more than anything he felt helpless. This wasn't something that he could fix or even knew how to go*

*about helping in this area at all.*

*" I wish I could help you son." Arthur said softly. "But I'm not going to pretend like I know what to say. I don't want to lead you wrong and if I tried I have a feeling I would do just that."*

*Bill's mouth twisted into a frown and he went back to fiddling with the object in his hands again absentmindedly.*

*" I know. Thanks for trying though... I don't really think anyone could really understand. After all there really isn't that many families in our world as big as ours and... well I don't think many people could understand my position." Bill said sadly.*

*Arthur felt a stab of guilt. Something must have shown on his face because suddenly Bill looked taken aback.*

*" I don't blame you guys at all you know. I love all my siblings and would never wish them gone." Bill hurriedly explained.*

*Arthur smiled at his son.*

*" I know." Arthur patted his son on the shoulder before standing. "You know how proud I am of you don't you? For watching out for your siblings so spectacularly over the years? I know they don't understand enough to appreciate the sacrifices you've made, but I do. Every time I've seen you do something for them, big or small, I just want to brag about it to everyone who will listen. I can tell that when you get a family of your own... I think you'll outdo me by a mile."*

*The wobbly smile his words brought and eyes brimming with pride made Arthur feel a great deal of warmth in his heart.*

*" I don't think I could ever outdo you Dad." Bill said, the wobble turning into a full blown grin.*

*"Are you kidding?" Arthur exclaimed in fake shock. "Why I had never even held a baby before you in my life. You've got a major head start on me I can tell you that. You've already gotten a handle of this parenting thing. Took me years to figure it out."*

*Bill laughed.*

*When Arthur went to bed that night his wife told him that she couldn't get anything out of Ron about the fight. He already resolved himself to going up to the room before work the next morning when the loud creaking of steps sounded. Arthur motioned to his wife that he would attend to it.*

*Getting out of bed Arthur cracked open their door just in time to see his youngest son enter his eldest son's room. Curious Arthur quietly walked down the hall to listen at his children's door. Ron had left it cracked open slightly. The eight year old boy had crawled into Bill's bed and was whispering to the eighteen year old. Ron was telling him about his and Percy's fight.*

*Percy had overheard Ron being disrespectful to their Mother's Aunt Muriel (their great Aunt) during the families visit this past weekend. Percy had taken him to the side a little after they'd gotten home and started yelling at him. Bill listened diligently to the words half spoken and half sobbed (both unaware that Arthur was standing outside the door). When Bill asked Ron why he had been disrespectful Arthur found himself floored.*

*Muriel had called Ron a useless leftover who hadn't inherited anything particularly desirable. Percy had come in when Ron snapped back at her with his famous temper he'd inherited from Molly. Ron hadn't wanted to tell their mother because Molly loved her Aunt and Percy wouldn't listen to his side at all. And then Charlie had gotten angry at him for hitting Percy.*

*Bill had quietly rocked the boy back and forth for a while as he mumbled things Arthur couldn't hear. Bill explained quietly that it wasn't alright to hit people to get them to listen to you and that*

*sometimes you just have to wait the other person out. His eldest talked to Ron about what to do about Muriel and their mother, about trying to keep your temper, and how to handle a situation when an elder is in the wrong.*

*Ron fell asleep listening.*

*Bill fell asleep in content as he held his baby brother in his arms.*

*Perhaps Bill wouldn't be able to stay as close to them after he left or perhaps he would, but no one would ever be able to take these moments away from him.*

*When they were finally asleep Arthur closed the door all the way. He'd have to have a talk with Muriel tomorrow after work... No child of his was a useless leftover and he'd make sure the woman knew it. Arthur went to his room and fell asleep prouder of Bill than ever before.*

---

A dry tongue moved over cracked lips. The smell of vomit filled the apartment. Ron had attempted to cast a *scourgify* spell, but his magic had failed on him and instead the action caused him to vomit the rest of his dinner into the trash can beside the tiny bed. Some of it missed.

Intense pain ran rampant through his body and by the taste of copper in his mouth Ron was sure he'd bitten his tongue. He couldn't move. Even breathing sent sharp, unpleasant tingles through his chest. He wasn't cold at all... in fact his body felt as if it were on fire. His pain reliever was on the counter and though the apartment was small the thought of walking *all the way* over there was just *impossible*.

Maybe if he crawled?

Ron made to push the blanket off his body, but his back immediately arched in pain as if he'd been stabbed. He held as still as possible

as the pain lessened. Not daring to move he stared off into the darkness of his apartment. His breaths were raspy and eerily loud in the lonely apartment. He was so thirsty. There was an empty water bottle beside his bed from yesterday. Why hadn't he refilled it before coming over here to sleep? Oh... yeah. He'd been exhausted from class and work. He practically fell into bed unconscious.

This had been happening more and more often lately. Not being able to move. The stretches of time he was like this was getting longer though... Black spots appeared covering random spots of the room and he vaguely wondered what time it was. He knew he had to be somewhere, but for the life of him he couldn't remember.

' *Hahaha... for the life... hahaha...* ' A raspy chuckle slipped from his lips. Sweat poured down the side of his face. Ron moved his face more toward his pillow, enjoying the cool cloth there, closing his eyes blearily. There was a knock on the door. The loud thumping echoed throughout the tiny apartment. It made his head hurt. Something trickled into his eyes and Ron groaned in disgruntlement dimly realizing it was sweat. The knocking went on for a while, but eventually faded away.

A noise much louder than his raspy breaths echoed through the room; his stomach. Blearily he tried to remember the last time he'd eaten. There were no windows in his apartment and therefore no way to know how long he'd been asleep. He remembered grabbing a bite to eat just before work. His stomach growled again.

Ron closed his eyes and willed his stomach to stop. It only grew louder. Time seemed to go by aching slowly, but the pain never left. He wondered why he was so hungry. He was rarely hungry anymore... since he'd started the treatment.

At some point Pig came through the window with a letter on his leg. The little owl pulled at his hair and hooted energetically while shaking his foot at him. The letter gently tapped his face. Flinching at the contact Ron shuddered as he reached for the letter... Wait. There were no windows. How did Pig get in? The owl was supposed

to wait at the owlery for him set up at the end of the apartment complex.

A hand touched his forehead.

Crying out in fear Ron instinctively reached for his wand before his body curled up in pain. He screamed, but his throat was so dry only a painful rasp left his mouth. The hand came back to feel his forehead and a voice above him talked loudly, but he couldn't understand what they were saying.

Breathing in shallowly Ron turned his head the tiniest margin to try to see who the person was. Everything was extremely hazy, but he could make out a pair of big brown eyes. Lips moved, but he couldn't understand the person. Their words sounded very far away. The big brown eyes stared worriedly at him.

"ione." Ron mumbled.

A finger touched his lips softly before a cup of water was brought to them. Drinking greedily he felt some drip down his chin and soak his shirt. The coolness felt amazing. The figure tried helping him sit up, but when Ron screamed in pain they immediately let him lie down again. A cold cloth was put on his forehead.

" 'Mione." Ron rasped.

The figures lips moved again. Brown hair falling into their face. Something vile was brought up to his lips causing Ron to first flinch away, but then relax as he vaguely recognized his pain reliever potion. Ron cringed as cold flooded his veins. The person held him tightly and he felt himself relax even further as he realized it was a female holding him.

"Miss' you 'Mione." Ron rasped almost inaudibly.

Ron closed his eyes and knew no more.

The next time Ron woke up he could breathe easily. Opening his eyes slowly and looking about the room he found that the light was on and Antea sat at the tiny table on the other side of the room. Brown eyes stared absentmindedly at some paperwork while she twirled a pen in her hair, accidentally making knots. Pig lay nestled in his cage asleep.

' *So it wasn't Hermione.* ' Ron thought tiredly.

He tried sitting up, making it onto his elbows at least, and smiled as Antea's head jerked up in his direction.

"Hi." Ron croaked.

Antea rushed over to Ron before kneeling beside him.

"I reckon I've gotten me-self a head full of silver hair now thanks to you." Antea said softly. "Big, fat stinkin' silver all over the place."

Ron pushed himself the rest of the way up, happy to note that while he was freezing the pain was relatively gone.

"The silver looks... good on you." Ron croaked.

"Aye it does, but that's beside the point ye git." Antea said as she brought a bottle of cold water to his lips.

Ron pulled it closer in trembling hands, gulping dangerously fast, as Antea watched him. He choked, sputtering water into his hands. Antea tried to take the bottle back from him, but Ron shook his head and held it against his chest as he leaned his back against the wall.

It felt as if his limbs were made of lead. He shivered, looking around for his large jacket, but not seeing it. Ron adjusted himself, pulling his legs up and crossing them, before straightening his back. Antea sat silently beside him while he tried to get his body to listen to him, but when he finished her neutral features turned stormy.

"You're a stubborn idiot Ron, but I'm not gonna scold you. If it was me all sickly I'd probably 'ave been doing somet'in similarly stupid." Antea said seriously, purposefully eyeing the ceiling as she talked. "So instead of lecturing you like I 'aught ta, cause I know it's gonna just go in one ear and out the other, I'ma gonna start checking up on you."

"Antea," Ron started wearily... tiredly. "I'll be more careful. You don't need to do that. I'm not your responsibility. I'm an adult, not some kid that needs a babysitter."

He expected a blowup of righteous fury like Hermione or Ginny normally reacted. To Ron's surprise Antea laughed loudly. The young woman lurched forward into the kitchen, the ten steps it took to get there, and began setting the tiny table.

For three people.

"Yes." Antea called across the room. " 'Cause all adults know exactly what's right all the time and are perfect in every way. Go away with ye boy!"

Ron slumped resignedly, rubbing his face in circles, and wondering where the many utensils came from. He could have sworn he only had one set.

"You've been outta it for two days boyo. You're due to go to the hospital tomorrow for yer operation. You're classmate Traux been comin' and knockin' on your door three times already. Ye missed meeting up with him for a study session?"

Antea continued from the kitchen, pausing in thought.

"And a class. Last time he came to check up on ye was this mornin.' Sent him to get lunch for us. Kid looked rather unnerved to see ya all sickly. Thought the bloke knew already though."



"He does, but I think he's the kind that lives in the moment. Doesn't think about it unless something reminds him of it or it's shoved in his face. Even then he likes to liven things up. He reminds me of George." Ron rasped.

"One o though twins?" Antea asked absentmindedly.

Ron nodded. He felt rather disgusting. All the sweat had dried making his skin feel as if there was another layer to it. His clothes still felt slightly damp.

"I'm going to take a quick shower okay?" Ron called out as loudly as his throat would allow, then paused. "How'd you get in?"

Antea blushed brilliantly.

"Just be happy I did boyo. Now get." She told him, making a shooing motion with her hands.

Ron shook his head in disbelief as he stumbled into the bathroom. She'd already had the chance to rob him blind or slit his throat, so though his paranoia beseeched him to stay in the room and watch her, he ignored it and entered his bathroom. His wand still lay carefully hidden in his sleeve though.

Habits die hard.

Letting hot water spray across his back for a moment Ron enjoyed the warmth it supplied. He craned his neck and allowed the liquid to ease his tense trembling muscles. The pain was mostly gone thanks to the pain reliever potion, but the spasms and constant trembling still persisted despite the medicine. Grabbing a soaped cloth, Ron ran it down his body, wincing when he felt the beginning of his ribs and the way his muscles he'd earned in the war seemed to be diminishing further... like they never existed.

Staring blankly down at the drain he watched his blood trickle around the hole in a spiral. His left arm was now one big giant, swollen

bruise and discoloration despite the small size of the treatment area. Nurse Cecily said it was natural. To take a single spot and periodically attack it results in the area surrounding it becoming agitated. The wound itself looked worse than normal though... Ron closed his eyes in thought. Then it hit him.

*' I haven't put any magic replenishing ointment or healing salve on it. She said I've been asleep for two days and I'm supposed to put ointment on it at least three times a day.'*

Ron gingerly rinsed the area with soap. He rotated his arm under the shower, closing his fingers into a fist carefully, making sure he could still move them. When all of his digits responded to his mental commands Ron let out a sigh of relief. Quickly washing his hair Ron stepped out of the shower.

And just as quickly realized he hadn't brought any clothes into the bathroom with him.

With a young woman outside his door.

Enclosed in a tiny apartment.

Nothing but a *towel* around his waist.

His ears turned bright red.

"Antea?" Ron rasped out through the door.

"Yeah?" The young woman called back.

"Can you... I mean... do you... I need a pair of clothes. Could you just grab me some from my... drawer."

"Sure!"

Ron blushed hard; a girl going through his underwear drawer. Not even Hermione or Ginny had done something like that. Thank Merlin

none of his siblings were ever going to find out about this. They would be unmerciful.

The door to the bathroom creaked open the smallest bit and through it he could see Antea with her eyes closed, holding out a set of clothes to him, he took them hurriedly. Thanking her profusely he shut the door.

"Thank Merlin ye wear boxers boyo. Practically comfy shorts they are. It would 'ave been right embarrassin' to go through a bunch o' briefs." Antea called through the door teasingly.

If he hadn't seen Fred's body he would have thought his brother followed him to Australia in the form of a pollyjuiced woman named Antea.

When he was dressed Ron walked carefully toward the table, mindful of how weak his body felt, before stopping abruptly. Traux stared at him from the table, bag of Chinese takeout seemingly forgotten in his hands, mouth slightly open. Ron walked even slower into the room before cautiously sitting down at the table, mindful of his still unwrapped open wound. Traux's eyes never left him though.

"'e look's a sight like a bag o' bones without that coat of his don't he?" Antea asked as she grabbed one of the white boxes and opened it up.

Traux blinked, seemingly coming out of a trance, before averting his eyes.

"Yeah. Sorry. Didn't mean to stare it's just... just... mate you really don't look good." Traux stated worriedly. "I mean you usually just look a bit worn down with the jacket, but without it..."

Ron grinned tiredly at him before grabbing the replenishing cream set in front of him. His fingers twitched and his eyes looked over towards his hoody. It was very difficult to not rush over and cover all the scars immediately with the long sleeved attire. He needed to do

this first. They were all silent, Antea and Traux alternating between looking around the room awkwardly, and stealing glances at Ron's swollen and badly bruised arm.

"How much longer you got before that arm's completely done with?" Antea asked.

"They've gotten the most dangerous infected area drained from my arm. They said they're gonna leave the rest of it for later and go for the section above my lungs next after the operation coming the day after tomorrow." Ron said tiredly as he started bandaging it.

It looked very difficult, trying to wrap his arm with one hand. It clearly irritated Ron because he had a scowl on his face. Antea silently took the bandages from him and began wrapping it herself.

"Thanks."

When she finished Ron relaxed a bit before wrinkling his nose at the plate shove toward him. Ron pulled the plain white rice by him reluctantly. He scooped a little of it onto his plate before putting the rest into the middle of the table. The thought of eating was slightly nauseating right now. Antea promptly picked it back up and scooped several spoonful's onto his plate. Ron glared at her sourly as the young woman took a big bite of her own food. Traux watched the exchange quietly. The group of three sat quietly eating for a few minutes before confusion clouded Ron's face.

"Where'd the extra dishes come from?" Ron's raspy voice asked.

Antea wrinkled her nose at him before gesturing to the large bite she'd just taken and throwing her hands up in mock anger.

"Well maybe if you wouldn't take such large bites." Ron muttered. An image of Hermione glaring at him popped into his mind. He smiled.

The irony.

Antea flipped him the bird.

Ron laughed hard at that, but his deep laugh strained his throat ending with a deep wracking coughing fit instead. Traux immediately jumped up toward the sink and brought him a cup of water.

"You okay mate?" The young man asked worriedly.

Ron nodded, taking the cup gratefully as his shoulders trembled from the coughs, and waited impatiently for the fit to end. He gave Traux and Antea a weak smile as they began to subside and breathed in deeply till Traux fidgeted, picking up his mug and setting it down three times before finally sighing. He looked up and caught Ron's eyes.

"Ron mate... I think you need to stop coming to the lectures." Traux finally stated.

Ron stared at him for a long moment, frowning heavily, before turning away.

"I agree with him boyo." Antea added just as quietly.

"You missed the last lecture and you're going to miss all of next week." Traux stated imploringly. "You're not going to be in any condition to go to classes the few weeks after that and you're just getting worse and worse so I'm guessing you won't be able to really go at all after the ritual anyway."

"What he's trying to say is that you're killing yourself." Antea put in bluntly and loudly.

Both Ron and Traux flinched.

"I'm not..." Ron began, but Antea slammed her fist on the table.

"For thee love oh... stop acting like such a chiseler. You're not going." Antea snarled.

"What do I tell my family then?" Ron said quietly, resignedly.

"Yer family are a bunch o dense bowsies and that includes your lad and lass." Antea announced.

"They aren't. They're good people." Ron defended "And *please* stop referring to Harry as my lad. It's just disturbing."

"Agreed." Traux muttered.

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When Traux and Antea left Ron sent Pig out with a letter to Mrs. Salen explaining why he hadn't been to work the last two nights. It would not be pretty when he got to work that was for sure. He sighed heavily as he pulled the two letters Pig brought him from Hermione and Harry. He dreaded opening them. Tapping the envelops against the table Ron looked around the room to find an excuse to postpone doing just that.

He spotted his duffle bag in the corner already packed for his stay at the hospital. His laundry was already finished as well thanks to Antea. Traux had picked up several bags of groceries for him when he'd seen Ron's cupboards were practically empty. He'd already taken his medicine for the day and was already dressed in his workers uniform. Ron sighed in defeat before ripping open Hermione's. Might as well get the more painful one over with.

*Ronald you're being ridiculous. Harry and I know perfectly well how busy you are and are fully capable of distracting ourselves while we wait for you to finish. Honestly I'm going mad not being able to see you and I know Harry is as well. We both miss you terribly. You know very well that you don't have to entertain us or show us around town. We're very much grown up you know? And Harry and I can bring more blankets and what not if that is what you're worried about. I know you only brought the bare minimum for one person. Really Ronald it's not as if we would be bothered by that sort of thing.*

*See you soon.*

## *Hermione*

Ron clenched his teeth. God damn her... why did she have to be so stubborn? Now he'd be forced to hurt her feelings... something that he'd been trying to avoid at all cost. Why did she have to be so damn clever and independent? Despite his irritation at her, Ron carefully folded up her letter and put it in the box that held all of their letters. If she wasn't the way she was Ron wouldn't have fallen in love with her in the first place. His goodie too shoes, moralistic, know it all, arrogant, kind, clever and completely irritating Hermione.

Ron pulled out a quill and ink set for a reply. It was difficult. So very, very difficult to write what he needed to. He needed Hermione to be angry enough to not want to talk to him, but not angry enough to come all the way down here in a burning glory intent on firing spells at him till he begged for mercy. George may snicker at that picture all he wanted... Ron would never underestimate Hermione's temper. George didn't know half the things Hermione had done. If he did Ron was sure the Joke shop owner would be more careful around the woman.

Only when a pile of practice letters sat in the bin beside Ron's bed did he feel confident enough in his work. He'd even managed to come up with an excuse as to why he would be at the hospital for such a long time. He'd allow Pig to sleep tonight and send him off in the morning.

*Hermione... I'm going to be one hundred percent honest... I'm bloody stressed right now because there was a disaster down here a little bit ago. The hospital is filled to the brim with victims and I've been so busy helping people I haven't had time to breathe. I don't need you and Harry down here right now making everything worse. You'll just be in the way. You only know a couple medical tricks and there's no bad guy to fight so just stay home and relax. I just... I really don't need to deal with you right now. Don't come down.*

*-Ron*

It was perfectly balanced between rude, rushed and stressed. Enough that Hermione would be hurt, but slightly understanding. The insinuation that she would be in the way and a bother would keep her in England... probably even enough for her to send a nasty letter back telling him that just because he was stressed didn't mean he had to be mean. Hermione would more than likely snap at him about not wanting to come anyways.

She always became defensive and a bit snooty when her pride was hurt. She wouldn't talk about visiting again until he invited her simply on the basis of principle. Ron felt a bit guilty, using what he knew of her to manipulate her, but she was too stubborn for anything else to work.

Glancing at the time Ron grimaced. He'd have to be at work in about an hour and a half. He'd spent two hours trying to write the letter. Harry's would be easier because he'd already come up with an excuse and Harry wasn't the type to hunt you down if you pissed him off enough. Harry avoided you like the plague. Exactly what he needed at the moment, though if he worded it just so he might be able to manage not pissing him off. Ron pulled Harry's letter to him.

Ron read through it carefully. He loved Harry's letters because he would tell Ron all about what was going on at home. Teddy was apparently crawling all over the place now. Kingsley was in the middle of creating a new policy regarding trials for those arrested following Voldemort's fall. His mum was harassing George in his shop every other day about eating more and this and that. Ginny had won her first quidditch match as captain. Perce was considering breaking off his relationship with Penelope Clearwater.

It wasn't until the last page that he found what he'd been dreading.

*Why can't we come to visit? No excuses. Are you avoiding us because of the fight this past summer? If you are then you're being a prat. I miss my best friend.*

*-Harry*



Ron frowned. Looking up at the clock again he knew he'd have to leave soon to make it to work on time. He tapped the quill nervously against the paper, staring down at it as if the thing would bite him.

*No, it's got nothing to do with this last summer you giant git. AND I was pissed off at Ginny and my brothers so what exactly does that have to do with you? Any other time I wouldn't care, honest, but I'm scheduled to pretty much live in the hospital all next week. There was a nasty hurricane that ran through here recently and we've got victims flowing in like you wouldn't believe. I wouldn't be home at all for you to see me. And don't even think about it! There's nothing you can do to help. We don't need a tyrant killed or anything like that. Plus if I actually manage to get home to sleep some I don't want a baby there keeping me up the whole damn time. I miss you guys too but... you'd just stress me out more at the moment. So just stay in England... go visit George, say hi to Neville or something, spoil Teddy.*

Ron frowned. It still sounded like he was hiding something or perhaps that was merely his own paranoia that was talking. He picked up the quill again and told Harry about the Carnival Rose talked about. Harry was muggle raised too, he would know what she was talking about. He'd refrained from asking Hermione... knowing that she would still be irritated with him and wouldn't tell him out of spite. He didn't need to really worry about Harry being mad at him for being rude to Hermione. Ron knew that she wouldn't show her letter to Harry, but would instead go around in an agitated state for the rest of the day.

Perhaps that was why he was paranoid though. He knew Hermione and Harry well enough to be able to predict their reactions and act accordingly. He knew them well enough to be able to read between the lines of their letters and manipulate them according to his needs. Could they do the same to him? They knew him just as well as he knew them. So could they read between the lines of his letters?

There was that fine difference though wasn't there? Ron was a great deal more cynical than either of his friends. Among the three of them

it was Ron that constantly reminded them when they were over their heads and warning them about the darker nature of people. He was the realist among his idealist best friends. Ron was far more distrustful towards people than Harry and Hermione who constantly wanted to believe the best in people.

He had learned over the years that his best friends needed him to be the blunt one of the group. He'd been called out many times because of it by various people over the years. When Harry was bombarded by others with questions or demands because of being the boy who lived it was Ron who would snarl and yell at them to bug off. People called him rude. When Hermione was being overbearing or unfair with her demands towards him and Harry it was Ron who would tell her honestly that she was being too much. She called him insensitive. When their classmates wanted him to put in a good word to Harry about them it was Ron who told them to get lost. They called him a jerk.

The only person Ron had never really been able to stand up to and fight back with was Harry. Every argument they'd ever had Ron's bluntness and honesty seemed to go right out the window. Instead of yelling till he was hoarse, like he did with Hermione, Ron would try to state his stance before backing down. When Harry lost his temper Ron turned meek... with the exception of locket induced anger/frustration. He often told Harry the he was as good as blood, but when they argued... It never felt like he was arguing with one of his brothers.

It felt like he was arguing with his friend who would at any moment realize that there were dozens of classmates around them who could easily take his place. When he argued with Harry there was always that fear that if he really and truly angered him then Harry would turn his back to Ron and disappear forever. And if the choice ever came between them Ron knew that Hermione would always choose Harry.

It was simple fact. There was no self-depreciation or a lack of belief in his friendship and love for Hermione. It was not due to his pessimistic nature that he'd come to this conclusion In all honesty he

did feel a bit of bitterness and anger, but it had ebbed through the years to a quiet acceptance. Hermione had developed a protective and loving admiration for Harry through the years earned through their various perils centered around the boy who lived.

Ron glanced at the clock. He needed to head towards work. Pig would be at the owlery for the apartment complex by now. He'd let him sleep. Ron heaved himself from the chair, taking his large hoodie and throwing it on. It seemed bigger than when he'd first gotten it. Ron fidgeted, uncomfortable with that thought, before leaving the two letters behind.

The severe stare he received from Mary Salen as he walked through the door caught him off guard. Ron steadily walked through the café, carefully avoiding her gaze, but when he went to grab his waiter's apron he found a hand around his wrist. A hand gripped his chin and forced it downwards. A pair of soft brown eyes stared up at him shining with an array of emotions. For Ron it seemed as if the entire café went deadly silent, but he couldn't move his head to see if it was just his imagination or if the crowds were really watching them. The grip on his chin tightened for a moment before relaxing and letting go.

"You're not working as a waiter anymore Ron."

Ron's heart stopped at the words. He wouldn't be able to pay for treatment without this job.

"I want you as the cashier. No more running around and lifting heavy plates." Mary said sternly.

Mary's hand dropped to her side. The old Ron would have been heavily annoyed at the insinuation that he couldn't handle something as simple as carrying dishes, but the worn down, disheveled and bone weary person that had emerged in the last month or so just nodded in gratitude. Gratitude that she wasn't firing him. Thankful that he'd meet someone kind enough to place him in a less

strenuous position. Indebted for the job and her leniency because of his treatment.

Instead Ron gave her a watery smile and nodded.

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"What's that git up to?" George mumbled as he finished reading the letter.

He put it back in its place on the table near where the piles of research materials lay seconds before Hermione and Harry walked back into the room. The twins had always had a bit of a... sticky finger problem caused by overwhelming curiosity. It was what lead to them acquiring the Marauder's map from Filch's office and painstakingly experimenting with it until they cracked the secret password.

He and Fred, purely out of curiosity concerning the opposite sex and by no means as a way to get dates, managed to nick several messages going between girls. Over the years they had gotten quite good at impressing girls with their 'understanding' of what they wanted (Really if girls would just *tell* guys what they wanted things would be much easier).

The point of the matter was that he and Fred knew a great deal of the goings arounds of the castle and that skill had transmitted into their everyday skills for work. A simple visit to a rival for a friendly chat who left many important documents lying about tended to be very informative outings. During the war this skill aided them even more in being able to get details to things that many people otherwise wouldn't want them knowing. Once more they had gained the unique and valuable skill of being able to scan papers and instinctively *know* what was important and what was not.

So when he walked into Harry and Hermione's apartment and saw the table loaded with papers upon papers it was the most natural thing in the world to allow his eyes to scan over them quickly. The letter from his little brother stood out like a sore thumb amongst the

pure blood history research. And it was even more natural, seeing as how if he and Fred possessed an ounce of polite refrainment they'd never have gotten to where they were before the war, to read the letter the moment both of his hosts were out of the room.

Which lead to the realization that his brother was full of crap. The *odds* that a disaster would lead to an increase in patients the week before Harry and Hermione wanted to visit were pathetically slim. Though with their luck...

No, it was total bullshit.

It wasn't even a particularly good lie. Really? A disaster? He was going to have to thoroughly teach his brother how to come up with decent, *believable* lies the next time he saw him. Merlin have mercy on that prat. How was he so good at strategizing and so horrible at deceit?

Fully exasperated at his little brother George hardly noticed when a child started crying in the other room. Harry pulled himself from his chair tiredly before retrieving the infants and rocking him softly up and down. Hermione smiled fondly at the infant who, at the site of the young woman, changed his hair from black to bushy brown. His whimpers simpering off to a steady unhappy whine George found himself wrinkling his nose.

It wasn't that he didn't like children per say... it was just that he and Fred had never really been very good at handling them. He and Fred tended to make them cry more than anything. Not to say that he'd never tried to be... nice. He was just never particularly successful. Like the time Ginny excitedly volunteered to walk one of their mother's friends dog and she ended up being dragged harshly into one of the muggle mailboxes. He had tried to comfort her as she sobbed and held her bruised nose, but she pushed him away and screamed at him. It may have been because he was laughing so hard it was difficult to breathe, but at least he *tried* to comfort her.

"How's Teddy been so far?" George asked politely.

While he wasn't very good with them that didn't mean he didn't care. He would help and watch out for the little nymph. He owed Tonks that much for everything she did for him and George... hell, his whole family the last few years.

"He's been wonderful." Hermione replied, rubbing her eyes.

"And tiring. He's gonna be a real handful once he learns to walk." George joked.

"It's not him." Harry said softly, moving the now gurgling baby to his other side. "It's just that Kingley had us training hard all week before our break. Then he was handed to us before we could even get a good nights sleep so..."

"Ahh. Joyful." George said sympathetically.

"We'll be fine once we get a good nights sleep. Considering how much energy he's been putting out all day I'm sure he'll sleep through till morning." Hermione stated positively.

"It's too bad your trip to visit Ron didn't work out." George prodded. "You could have handed him to Ron and hit the sack."

Immediately both Harry and Hermione tensed. Harry's eyes moved away from George even as Hermione's swiftly glanced toward his with a glint of steel.

"Yes... well apparently Ronald's very busy this week." Hermione declared tersely.

Ahhh... so she fell for it. They both had. Admittedly though it was probably due to their evident lack of sleep. They would most likely realize they'd been gipped by the end of the week once they were rested up and recovered. Too late to really do anything really. Ron would be getting belated letters of indignation that was for sure.

The question though was whether he should inform them of it now or allow them to realize...

It would be best to see the bottom of the hole before he pushed anyone in it though. He'd have to write to Ron and figure out why exactly his brother was trying to avoid them.

"Here," George said resignedly, holding out his arms. "Give me the little tyke for a bit and go take a nap."

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"Does it make me look ugly?" Rose asked quietly as she looked into the hospital's bathroom mirror.

The surgical enchantments she'd undergone had caused part of her face to be slightly swollen and turn a nasty blotchy shade. Despite her mother telling her to stay in bed Rose had gone into the bathroom the moment she left the room to grab lunch for the three of them. Her lips had started to tremble the moment she saw her face.

"There's nothing in the world that could take away from how pretty you look." Ron told the ten year old.

Rose blushed madly, fiddling with the hem of her shirt, before messing with her hair. Ron smiled amusedly at her. She was so much like Ginny at that age.

He remembered going to his mom for help when Ginny kept asking him how she looked and when he told her she looked like she always did she'd begin to tear up. Honestly he didn't understand girls. His mom had told him that a girl wanted to always be told they looked 'prettier' than they normally did. Ron had questioned what was so bad about looking like they normally did. Molly had replied that all girls think there's something wrong with their normal looks and that it was just a silly girl thing. Ron didn't understand it, but there it was. He was mighty proud of himself for not screwing it up too.

Okay... maybe Mary had told him what to say when Rose asked. Apparently the woman had gone through much of the same thing with past surgeries and warned him ahead of time. Still... he hadn't messed it up.

"Ron?" Rose asked softly as she stepped out of the bathroom.

Ron looked up from the puzzle twisting around on the paper. Mary had introduced him to them and he'd found he loved trying to figure out how to move the blocks and string around with his wand to uncover the center.

"I was just wondering..." Rose trailed off. "Do you think a guy could like me? I mean... do you think that maybe... I could go on a date with a boy someday."

Ron dropped the quill in his hand to stare at her.

"Uh... well... aren't you a little young to be thinking of those things?" Ron asked instead.

"I'm ten and besides... A boy kissed Ashley on the cheek the other day." Rose told him indignantly.

Ashley was a muggle girl who played with Rose a lot at the park near the café. Ron inwardly cringed. How the hell was he supposed to answer this? He didn't get his first kiss till he was 16 for Merlin's sake!

"Ah... well... I don't see why any guy wouldn't want to date you... someday. I mean..." Ron sputtered out.

*' Oh bloody hell... she was coloring with crayons just yesterday! How the hell did this come up?'*

Just then Mary walked in with three trays of food balanced with grace that spoke of her years owning a café. Ron thanked whatever it was that was looking after him in that moment. Rose crawled back



onto the bed hurriedly, but not fast enough. Mary gave her a knowing irritated glance as she placed the trays down. Placing a hand on her rounded stomach the woman sat down heavily onto her daughter's bed.

"Doing okay Mrs. Salen?" Ron asked.

"I'm a month away from passing a bowling ball through my little canal and you want to know if I'm okay? I'm terrified! Don't let anyone tell you that the second child is easier boy. Now I know what's gonna happen to me." Mary said despondently. "Young woman go through pain for fifteen hours and then it's over, but after the first kid you spend the whole nine months dreading the birth pain."

"Sounds like a nightmare." Ron muttered.

"Not at all." Mary moaned. "A nightmare is short."

"But then you get a baby right?" Rose asked as she scooted closer to her mother. "So everything a woman has to go through is worth it."

Ron, having forgotten about the little girl for a moment and taken his first bite already, swallowed prematurely. Coughing and hacking as Mary's loud, booming laugh filtered through the room Ron looked at the little girl with watering eyes. Her head tilted innocently to the side in question. Mary ruffled Rose's hair fondly before looking up at the ceiling in thought.

"Yes... having a child is worth the pain." Mary said after a moment. "But when you decide you want one you have to know that everything you do from that moment on is about the child. You can't be selfish. You have to make sure that you can care for them and have time for them."

"Like what you're doing now?" Rose asked brightly.

Ron ate his food quietly, immensely feeling the intruder on this conversation, but not knowing if leaving the room would be rude or

not. Rose snuggled closer to her mother, food tray forgotten for the moment, with eyes trained solely on her. Mary's eyes were closed as she took in a shuddering breath. She opened them and looked into her daughter's eyes.

"Being here for you is the most important thing to me, but I have been a bit selfish baby. It's unavoidable. Humans are naturally selfish creatures." Mary said quietly.

Rose wrinkled her nose in confusion and Ron couldn't help sharing in that feeling.

"What did you do that was selfish?" Rose asked.

Mary cupped her child's cheek softly before brushing her fingers through her hair.

"I always wanted a lot of children. That is the most selfish thing I could do though because there's a strong chance you're baby brother could get sick like you." Mary said softly. "It was selfish of me to want more, to risk such a thing."

Ron stared at her silently. Her words had struck a familiar cord. An image of his own mother came to mind; his mum who had desperately wanted a little girl and, despite not being able to afford it, she and his dad had continued to have children until they got Ginny. Suddenly feeling immensely tired and cold inside Ron pulled the hospital blankets over his shoulders as he continued to listen.

"But you said that you and daddy didn't know I would be sick." Rose asked confused.

"We didn't sweet heart, but I knew after you got sick that it's inherited. The chance is small, but still there sweetie and knowing that I still wanted another child. That's a selfish thing." Mary explained.

"I don't think you're selfish." Rose told her firmly.

Ron fell asleep listening to them talk late into the afternoon.

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The redhead shivered, hands crossed self-consciously as he stood nearly naked in the middle of the room, bare feet standing at the center of the ritual circle. A small pair of low cut shorts covered his private parts, black lines drawn across his abdomen where they'd be extracting the toxic tumor. He kept his eyes focused on the floor intent on pretending he wasn't about to have a highly dangerous ritual performed on him.

He'd been forced to put down a family members name in case something went wrong. Ron had debated about it throughout the night before finally choosing Bill. His eldest brother was the least likely to come in screaming at him if something went wrong and the best choice to break the news to the rest of his family should he end up dying. He already had a letter written out to Bill if the worst were to happen. Ron only had two possessions that were of any true value; Pig and the deluminator. Besides his last farewells he had asked Bill to make sure Hermione kept Pig and that the deluminator went to Harry.

The whole thing had been intimidating. It didn't feel like a precaution for a surgery, but rather his last will. It made him think a lot about what he was doing.

What if it was?

Did he really want this past summer to be the final time he saw all of his loved ones?

The anger in their eyes the last he saw of them?

A part of Ron wanted to walk out of the room. He wanted to postpone the surgery... at least until he saw them one more time.

There was a fear inside of him that he'd been pushing away for several days now. Things that he wanted to do before he died

because he had the chance. He still had the chance to do them as long as he breathed and... He was so scared, so, so scared. He didn't want to die and he didn't want leave his family yet. He didn't want to go through with this surgery.

His whole body, heart and mind was screaming at him to run.

As he stood there waiting for the Healers to come fear gripped him. He wanted to talk to his mum again, to banter with her like they use to, and forgive her. No... As he stood there he realized he'd already forgiven her. He didn't care anymore if she decided to change her mind later because he wasn't even sure if he'd make it that long. He wanted her to hug him like she did after he was poisoned. Hold him like she wanted to hold onto him forever. Most of all he wanted her to know that he wasn't afraid to get that connection back anymore.

He wanted to be close to Ginny again. He'd longed for it for such a long time... from the moment he'd lost it. He didn't know how to go about fixing it, but he knew he wanted it. He wanted to be able to call her 'his Ginny' again. Ron wanted to have her come to his room and sit next to him with her head leaning against his shoulder while they talked about their day like when they were little. That felt so impossible and far though.

He wanted to be there for George. The jerk who turned his teddy bear into a spider when they were little, but who would step on them for him if asked. The idiot who tried to get him to make an unbreakable vow to be the twin's servant, but who later tearfully apologized because he realized how dangerous it was. The git who tested out his products on and denied him a discount, but who sat with him late into the night after one of the products came out wrong and caused him to get sick.

A selfish part of him also wanted his big brother to be there for him right now and it felt wrong. It felt so wrong to want George there to help him when Fred was *dead*. George lost his best friend and other half and yet Ron wanted George with him to comfort *him*. Everyone in the family knew that George would need years to recover from the

loss. He would need encouragement and patients and kindness. George needed him to not need him right now. It was so hard though, because George and Fred were who he went to when he was upset with Hermione and Harry. They were who he took advice from when he needed it and right now he desperately needed it.

He wanted Bill to forgive him for running away when his friends needed him the most. The disappointment in his eyes burned so painfully in his memories that Ron didn't think they'd ever go away. Bill who had always been there for him and listened to his problems whenever he needed it. Bill who was fair and kind and reliable. He wanted his eldest brother to look at him as if he was proud just one more time.

He wanted... urgently needed to have Harry and Hermione there for no other reason than the support. For every other reason he wanted companionship from the loneliness, absolute trust amongst the paranoia of living surrounded by strangers, security when he slept, comfort when he woke from their nightmares, pillars of strength when he simply *could not get up* .

He wanted so much... And he wondered.

What would the mirror of Erised see in him now?

What would Sirius say about this?

What would Barty Crouch Jr. tell him?

And Dumbledore... who knew he'd run and given him the tool to return. Did he know about this too? Did the man see something in him in his years as a student that told the aged wizard he was a runner?

Candles burned at each of the eight points created from blood. Doctor Blake and the specialist Healer, a man named Puril, stood in front of him performing the final enchantments around the ritual circle.

"Please lay down for us Mr. Weasley." Doctor Blake instructed.

Ron did as told.

The floor was cold and hard, the only comfort given to him being that of a pillow for his head. There were rods coming out of the ground, conjured there for him to grip if the pain reliever should fail, and straps to keep him in place. A hand moved in front of him with a strange plastic thing that they'd explained was the mouth guard. Ron obediently allowed it to be placed into his mouth, grimacing at the feeling of awkwardness. As they moved the straps around his legs Ron tried to slow his steadily increasing breath. He felt tears prick the corner of his eyes, sliding down the side of his face.

He didn't want to be here.

He was so scared.

So, so, so scared.

His hands pulled against the restraints.

They held tight.

Taking deep calming breaths Ron tried to fight the sheer amount of panic that was rearing up inside of him.

He gripped the rods again.

Took another breath.

"That's it. Relax." Puril spoke softly. "Now I'm going to place the numbing spell on you. After that I will give you the muggle numbing medicine. I advise you not to look down at the needle. Then you're going to feel a deep desire to sleep that's caused by our enchantments. I want you to give in to this desire for me. Can you do that for me Mr. Weasley?"

Ron closed his eyes tightly as he heard the two men begin to chant. He instinctively flinched as he felt his very bones freezing. He was not aware of the needle being pressed into his skin to inject the medicine nor did he notice Dr. Blake beginning a long string of words from the second circle. He felt frost like breath leave his lips just before the intense drowsiness hit him. He fell into darkness wondering if he'd ever wake up again.

# Debt Ch8

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

A/N: It's alive! Completely rewritten this chapter. Back on track now! Thank god.

"I say there are spots that don't come off... Spots that never come off, d'you know what I mean?"

## Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire

*Spoken by Mad-Eye Moody.*

Chapter 8:

*"Mummy." Ron's voice called out tearfully.*

*The house was in shambles. Fred and George had somehow gotten ahold of Bill's wand and accidentally made the bookshelf in the living room explode. Laundry had piled up from having Charlie, Percy, Fred and George back from school for the Christmas break and Bill back from his internship for Curse breaking in Spain. Dinner was only half prepared. Muriel would be there in fifteen minutes and Arthur's distant relatives would be flooing over in less than an hour. She was an absolute frazzled wreck.*

*"Mum." Ron's voice called out again.*

*Molly stopped yelling out instructions to her older boys for a second to glance down at Ron. He had tears in his eyes and his lips were trembling, but he wasn't sobbing so it couldn't be that bad.*

*"I'm busy dear, what is it?" Molly asked as she tried to remember the incantation for creating herbs from the plants set out on the table she got in the garden out back.*



*" I fell and..." Ron began, but Molly cut him off.*

*" Ron please, you're a big boy now, you shouldn't be crying over scraped knees still.*

*She felt a bit guilty as she saw Ron wiping tears from his eyes and nodding, but really, he was ten already and shouldn't be acting that way. As she turned around she saw a large, new rip in Ron's jeans out of the corner of her eye. Tutting irritably to herself Molly sighed. Another set of pants that she would be repairing.*

*" Ron, go change your pants. The guests will be here any minute." Molly ordered.*

*She cleaned up the living room, inwardly peeved at her boys for exploiting the loophole of underage magic by using an older wizards wand, and decided that Fred and George would not be getting desert. Laundry was shoved into the Lenin closet just before Muriel walked into the house. Running her hands through her hair Molly tried not to let the stress get to her. Everything would be fine.*

*And everything did turn out fine. Arthur entertained the desks while Bill and Percy helped her finish cooking. Muriel seemed to be in a rather good mood which meant the night as a whole went well. The children didn't put up a fuss about going to bed and the adults all enjoyed a nice glass of wine before saying their goodbyes. Since her children behaved so well the night before, after the exploding shelf that is, Molly decided to get up early and cook the children pancakes with chocolate chips in them. Charlie's personal favorite. He would be taking his N.E.W.T.S this upcoming semester. Her boys were growing up so fast.*

*She peeped into each of her children's room and told them to get up for breakfast before heading downstairs. Percy came down first, already dressed and hair combed, causing Molly to smile. Bill stepped through next, bleary eyed with an oversized night shirt slipping down one shoulder, to sit next to Percy. Fred came in next leaning heavily against George who smiled brightly at her. Fred was*

*not a morning person in the least. She would never admit it, but she was rather fond of sneaking into his room in the morning and patting his cheek. The way he jerked awake and looked around like the hounds of hell were on his tail was one of the funniest things she'd ever seen. Molly imagined that McGonagall had done a fine job making sure her boys stayed out of trouble these past two years. Charlie walked in next with a still half asleep Ginny riding on his back.*

*They all sat down and started eating. Ron would still be a few minutes, they all knew, the boy took a while to wake up fully. When Charlie and Percy finished eating and Ron still hadn't come down though, Molly huffed. Bill noticing his mother's eyes on Ron's chair, laughed at her irritation.*

*" Want me to go get the sleeping goblin?" Bill asked, a grin pulling at his lips.*

*" If you don't mind dear, I swear he's worse than Fred." Molly announced in exasperation.*

*" I resent that." Fred called from across the table.*

*" She's got a point Forge." George told him, patting his shoulder.*

*" You're against me too Gred?" Fred asked in disbelief.*

*Molly shook her head as Bill stood up and headed up the stairs showing off the near shoulder length hair. She frowned. He really needed to get a haircut. There was no need to have all of that in a person's eyes. Her oldest had the prettiest brown eyes, but no one would be able to admire them if there was a curtain of hair in front of it. Going back to the dishes at hand she nearly dropped them at the sound of Bill's frantic voice.*

*" Mum! Something's really wrong!"*

*Molly felt her heart tighten inside her chest. Taking the stairs two at a time she practically slammed into the door at the bedroom just before the attic. She could feel the twin's footsteps behind her, but didn't pay them any mind as she knelt down beside her baby boy. Bill was stroking sweat soaked hair out of Ron's face as her littlest boy breathed raggedly into the side of his pillow.*

*How could she not have noticed when she went to wake everyone?*

*Molly placed her hand on Ron's forehead, feeling the heat radiating off of him.*

*"Ronnie can you hear me?" Molly asked softly.*

*Ron's eyes squinted open to look at her through clouded blue eyes. He nodded slowly.*

*"Ronnie is there anything that particularly hurts right now?" She asked gently.*

*His lips moved, but she couldn't hear him. Leaning forward she asked him to repeat himself.*

*"My leg really hurts." Ron whispered breathlessly.*

*Deeply confused by this answer, having expected him to say something about his stomach or head, Molly made a motion towards Bill to move. Bill hurriedly obeyed. Pulling off Ron's blanket she stiffened at the sight of blood spots in the same place she briefly saw the rip in Ron's pants yesterday. With shaking hands Molly pulled up Ron's pant leg as her boy winced and shuddered.*

*"What in Godric..." Bill muttered in shock.*

*From the doorway Fred and George stared in wide eyed horror at their little brother's leg. Molly's hand quickly went to her mouth. A deep gash, as if Ron had been sliced with the sharp side of a shovel, went three inches across his leg. It had been badly wrapped with*

*toilet paper, all of which was torn apart and falling off, and subsequently became infected. There was pus coming out of it and the sides were a nasty shade of purplish yellow.*

*" When did you get this Ron?" Bill demanded.*

*Ron's lips trembled. He tried to talk again, but the words were just whispers. Molly already knew the answer, but leaned forward anyways, automatically.*

*" When I... fell last night outside I dropped daddy's muggle tools. I fell on one."*

*" Shuu... I'm sorry baby. Mummy's sorry." Molly whispered as she leaned down to kiss Ron on the forehead. "Bill I need you to call the healer right now."*

*Bill was already halfway out the door before she finished speaking.*

*" Fred please go get a cup of water. George get a cold, wet rag." Molly ordered.*

*Molly stroked Ron's forehead alternating between telling Ron it would be alright and explaining to him how sorry she was about last night. Ron cringed at the touch.*

*" Mummy that hurts, please stop." Ron murmured.*

*She stopped immediately.*

*" I'm so, so sorry Ronnie. I didn't mean to ignore you. I should have listened." Molly whispered.*

*" I know, it's okay." Ron told he weakly, reaching out he wiped her tears away.*

*The sound of stomping steps coming up the stairs told Molly that the healer was there.*

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Molly Weasley couldn't relax. There were dark bags under her eyes despite the fact that she'd been sleeping in later and later. Arthur had been worried about her the past few weeks, but there was little that Molly could do to alleviate that because she didn't know *why* she couldn't relax.

She already checked on George every day. The boy wasn't doing okay and had his downs more than ups, but was doing so much better than the first few weeks after... after Fred died. So she *knew* that if George was the source of her unease that she would have realized it by now. She worried about George all the time, but she was there for him, and she could do no more than that. Her son was keeping busy at the shop and had numerous friends checking in on him all the time. Hermione and Harry made it their business to have George over several times a week as well. He received letters from Percy and Ron *at least* once a week. Percy even dropped by when he wasn't being sent out of country.

Bill too was perfectly fine with his wife Fleur at Shell cottage. She just talked to him that afternoon through the floo. Gringotts bank had finished its last repair, but were keeping fewer and fewer wizards employed at their establishments because of the recent war. Bills job was secured though because curse breakers were hard to find. Every Sunday the couple came back to the Burrow for dinner with her and Arthur.

Molly had written McGonagall asking after her daughter and discovered that Ginny was doing very well. Molly had been worried that the severe loss of so many of her close friends would have left her depressed, but McGonagall assured her that while the children struggled they were pulling together. Luna Lovegood and Ginny Weasley were hardly ever seen apart from one another nowadays. McGonagall had hired a healer who specialized in the mind and set up a room in the medical wing so that all students met up with the woman at least once every two weeks. Molly felt such relief at the news. Her daughter was doing well in all of her classes and was expected to be near the top of her graduating class.

Percy was working on a new relief program for those left homeless during the war. He tended to spend at least one night a week at George's and one at their own home. He apologized to Harry concerning his behavior after the triwizard tournament and while the two weren't the best of friends Harry had forgiven him. Her boy was making her proud through his hard work to fix what he'd done wrong for so long.

Harry and Hermione came over to the house for Sunday dinner as much as possible as well. She just checked in with them this morning to see how Teddy was doing. The little thing was running the two ragged, but their laughter was music to Molly's ears. It had been a while since she last heard them sound like that. They would be having their first Auror exam the beginning of next month. She was so excited for them. She'd long since stopped allowing the fear of her children's jobs affect her. What with a dragon caretaker, curse breaker and a certain trio giving her heart attacks every other day she knew thinking about it too much would just stress her out.

Her Charlie. Getting letters out of that boy was like pulling teeth, but he always floo called her when he entered town. She talked to him about four days ago and been delighted that he could make it to Christmas this year. Nothing seemed wrong. He talked to her just as animatedly as normal and he appeared fine. It was so difficult to tell though. He was all the way in Romania where anything could be happening without her knowledge. His work for the Order had dwindled significantly since the end of the war, not due to lack of need, but an increase in need by the Dragon Watch Association. A large bundle of dragon eggs had hatched several months ago, but the mother had been illegally butchered. Charlie was helping to keep the baby dragons alive while searching for a young female dragon capable of taking care of them.

And then there was Ron. He sent Arthur a letter every week telling him how he was. All of the letters their children sent was addressed to the both of them. She read it first and then gave them to Arthur when he got home from work. Ron's letters were addressed to the

both of them as well, but there was this way that Ron wrote them. *'Dad you should have seen the looks on their faces.'* *'You wouldn't believe what Antea showed me the other day! A baby Hippogriff. I even got to hold her dad.'* *'Mrs. Salen showed me how to work a muggle machine that makes cappuccinos. They taste nasty, but customers seem to love it. I'll show you how to work one sometime.'* *'Rose gets so excited when I show her magic. It doesn't matter what it is. It reminds me of you when you see muggle stuff dad.'*

It was like Ron didn't expect her to read his letters. He never addressed her in the letters about something specific. Everything inside pertained to things that Ron seemed to be saying directly to Arthur and only him. It hurt a little. So she questioned Arthur about it, thinking that she'd done something that upset him, possibly this past summer. Arthur had given her a steadying look as they sat in bed that night. It was contemplative and searching as his blue eyes looked into her chocolate brown. When he finally spoke, though his voice was soft and careful, it felt like she'd been slapped.

"Dear... You and Ron have never really... You've never shown much interest in what he has to say or what he does. I expect Ron doesn't know how to really talk to you."

Floored Molly could do little else, but stare blankly back at her husband. Was that true? Surely not. She had noticed some time ago that she and Ron weren't as close as she was to her other children, but it *couldn't* be that bad. She cringed as she tried to remember the last time they'd talked and found that... she didn't know. Beside her Arthur reached over and gently stroked her hair. There was no accusation in his eyes, just a tired understanding.

Molly shook her head slowly.

"I... Of course I'm interested. I love Ronnie." Molly denied softly.

"I never said you didn't love him sweet heart. You two just never really interacted much." Arthur told her gently.

"We talk. We've chatted up a storm in the kitchen lots of times. I... we... that is to say I've... oh dear Merlin." Molly murmured.

"You were busy. Whenever Ron was around there tended to be a dozen others as well. Ron understands."

"He's talked to you about it?" Molly asked incredulously, the hurt skyrocketing. "And you didn't tell me?"

Arthur sighed heavily, absently brushing fingers through a diminishing hair line.

"Molly dear, yes I've talked to him about it, when he was younger. I noticed that we, the both of us, tended to ignore Ron when Harry and Hermione are around. Ron would sort of... he'd just wander off if we started talking to them about something." Arthur began explaining. "When I confronted him about it he said he knew that we would be awhile and was just looking to entertain him-self until we were done. I told him that we weren't excluding him and that he was more than welcome in the conversation. He got very sad Molly... then just waved me off and smiled saying he knew that and he was fine."

Molly let out an undignified snort of disbelief.

Arthur nodded in agreement.

"I still accidentally ignored him sometimes, but I got better at including him and seeking him out for conversations. Ron's never really come to me for advise or help though, that's always been Bill, Fred and George. He just wants to tell me about his day usually and wants to listen to me tell mine." Arthur finished.

"Why didn't you tell me this back then?" Molly questioned.

"I did dear, but you were rather stressed at the time. It was when we were living at Grimmauld place." Arthur said, still stroking his wife's hair.



Long after Arthur had fallen asleep Molly lay awake staring up at the ceiling. It was the first night that her ritual began. Every night after Arthur fell asleep she found herself in the kitchen sipping at a cup of tea and staring into space. Usually she only sat there for an hour, but a feeling of dread had swallowed her in the last few weeks. Something felt immensely off to her. She couldn't place a finger on it, but she trusted her intuition. She floo'd her children more often and checked on them in person if they were close. She even sought out each of the remaining Order members just to make sure they were okay.

Time moved on though, and seemed to be making her out to be a simple old woman with too much time on her hands. Each week her children sent messages about how they were doing fine. Each day she saw that George seemed a little less depressed. Arthur was getting more and more worried about her and Molly couldn't help but believe it might be well founded. None of these facts allowed her body to relax.

The night it happened Molly groaned as she woke completely. It had taken her several hours of simply lying there and hoping for sleep to come for her to finally admit it wasn't going to happen. Turning over she quietly got up and left the room. She put the kettle on to boil water immediately. Bringing down the tea bags Molly breathed in deeply. Earl Grey's sweet smell drifted up to in the darkness of the room. Idly flicking on a light Molly sat down to wait for the whistle of steam.

Dragging her fingers over her too tired eyes Molly glanced at the Family clock absently before stretching her shoulder blades. They creaked under the strain.

Then it clicked.

Molly's entire frame whipped around to stare at the clock again.

Ron's hand pointed towards mortal peril.

She must have screamed because a moment later Arthur burst into the kitchen wand raised. Seeing her face, but no obvious instigator Arthur's eyes immediately followed hers to the clock. His arm dropped as his eyes landed on Ron's hand with wide eyes.

"We need to get to Australia." Molly cried out frantically as she jumped from her seat. The table was jostled causing the teacup on top to tip over.

"It doesn't open until seven Molly... that's five hours from now." Arthur told her as he moved towards the living room.

Molly followed him.

"There has to be an emergency port key station!" Molly snapped.

"All being used by the Order and Aurors at the moment for Death Eater containment and aide." Arthur answered, voice strained by tightly held back panic.

Arthur threw floo powder into the flames and shoved his head in.

"Minister of Magics Office Kingsley Shackbolt." Arthur yelled.  
"Kingsley! I'm sorry for calling so late, but it's an emergency."

Molly hovered behind him, both hands bunching up her nightgown with a white knuckled hold. There was the distant sound of a low moan and someone stumbling forward. A head popped up into the flames of the Weasley's living room fireplace that was most definitely not the Minister of Magic. It was a pale young man who appeared to be wearing Auror robes and the dark bags of someone who hasn't slept for three days.

"Weasley... Right, Order members, Mr. Shackbolt will see you as soon as he gets out of the latest meeting. One of our missions went south last night... Is it still night?" The young man asked with a yawn. His head turned from side to side as if searching for a clock.

"You might just be able to help us actually." Arthur said quickly, not wanting to allow time for the young man to leave. "We need a means of getting to Australia immediately. An Order member of our family is in mortal peril. Please... is there any transportation available... perhaps one of the emergency port keys going that way has returned?"

The man's face filled with sympathy.

"I'm sorry sir. Nothing has come in yet and as you know it takes a while to prep a port key for use. I'll see if the meeting is wrapping up yet and if it's not then I'll at the very least inform Mr. Shacklebolt anyways so that he knows to come straight here."

"Thank you." Arthur whispered.

The man disappeared. Arthur pulled back and grasped the hand that shot out to hold his. Molly knelt on the ground beside him and stared blankly into the fire.

"He's only supposed to be studying." Molly whispered. "It's not like with Harry and Hermione. He's not known in Australia Arthur! He's not supposed to be in danger!"

"Ronnie's never been very good at staying out of trouble Molly dear." Arthur said shakily, a dry laugh leaving his lips and echoing hollowly into the room. "That's not something that Harry inspired in him."

Molly nodded mutely in agreement.

Kingsley did not floo call them. Instead he came striding out of their fireplace and nearly walked into the kneeling couple. Nodding to them the tall, broad shouldered man automatically followed them into the kitchen. It was not the Minister of Magic in their home, but a long time friend from the Order. Kingsley was one of the very few left who survived both wars like Arthur and Molly. The three of them had seen many friends and family fall in their time; each time expecting it to be their turn.

Kingsley had been in their kitchen many a times discussing everything from what flavor he liked best in his tea to how to proceed with a full scale battle plan. It was a place the man felt comfortable in yet at the same time was weary of. Molly watched as Kingsley's eyes swiftly glanced at the clock, as all who entered the kitchen did, before his eyes widened.

"So it's Ron." Kingsley stated with apprehension.

Arthur nodded even while knowing such a movement was unnecessary.

"Can you do anything to help us get to him?" Molly questioned

"I've got a team of Aurors tracking down a man in Japan. They've got three emergency port keys, one of which is to Australia." Kingsley explained. "We've got a division of Aurors there, as you know due to your son, who will be able to back up the team if necessary."

"How long would it take them to find Ron?" Arthur asked shakily.

"They're a tracking team Arthur, and Ron isn't a criminal in hiding, so I imagine it shouldn't take more than an hour. Now where does Ron live?" Kingsley questioned. The man purposefully left out the fact that Ron had spent the previous year on the run from Death Eaters and was more than capable of escaping detection. Ron wasn't hiding from *them* so they had nothing to fear.

Molly scrambled to get one of the letters Ron had sent them several months ago when he first moved into his apartment. Arthur grimaced as he noticed his wife's shaking hands as she handed him the paper. Reading over it and finding what he wanted the Minister waved his wand whispering a spell.

A Lynx burst into existence, shimmering inside the kitchen before obediently sitting in front of Kingsley as the man relayed his

message. Once finished the creature of light seeped through the window and into the early morning sky like a shooting star.

"Now comes the unfortunate task of waiting." Murmured Kingsley.

The couple nodded their heads as one in agreement.

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Hestia Jones pushed her long black hair behind her ear as she approached the apartment door of Ronald Weasley. It surprised her that a member of the Order and a war hero would be staying in such a rundown dismal place. She had heard that the Weasley's, with most of their children in well off jobs now, were rather financially secure. They were a family that was known for their kindness and loyalty to each other, as was evident from the quick response of one of their own being in danger tonight. Surely they wouldn't have allowed one of their children to live in such a place? Checking the address again she confirmed it was correct.

Taking a deep breath she tapped the door three times while whispering a very familiar spell. The door became see through. If Ron was in Mortal Peril there may have been someone threatening them inside. Knocking would only alert the person. Carefully peering inside she felt slightly disgusted and concerned. No sign of Ronald Weasley anywhere. The paint was peeling and there it was incredibly tiny. And there were... Hestia's breath hitched. Potion bottles everywhere.

Whispering the unlocking charm Hestia was torn between annoyed and impressed that it didn't work. Neither did the next try or the next. Cursing the Auror stood up and closed her eyes in concentration.

"Zerito!"

Nothing.

Her most powerful unlocking spell had no effect on the apartment door. Well this was Ronald Weasley after all. One of the three

seventeen year old's who'd been hunted down by death eaters while they destroyed pieces of Voldemort's soul. Of course he would know powerful guarding spells. Not to mention the rumors going around the Auror department that the trio were rather... paranoid after the war. Not surprising.

Sad... but not surprising.

It didn't matter much. She knew the place that he lived and therefore could use the boy's presence from the door way to track him. No one had ever discovered where the trio stayed in all the time that they were on the run and therefore never were able to track them. From what she'd heard from Kingsley they stayed in a magical tent, never lingering in one place for more than a week. Poor kids. It must have been horrible in the winter for them.

Hestia swirled her wand around in a wide counterclockwise arc and watched as an energy from in front of the door was drawn into her wand. Turning to her left Hestia watched as the tip turned a deepish purple. Not that way. To the right then. It turned bright red.

"I'm coming kid." Hestia whispered as she took off down the hallway.

She had a high respect for the boy who Dedalus ordered her to track down and protect. Hestia had only seen glimpses of the boy over the years as she went in and out of the Order headquarters, but the things she'd heard her fellow members say were enough to impress her. She'd been skeptical of the idea of allowing children to reside there, but Sirius Black had a point. Those kids were constantly in danger because of who Harry was and because of their relations to so many members of the Order.

What would it have been like, she wondered, to have grown up surrounded by danger? Black had told her how Ron stood up to him on a broken leg in front of Harry at thirteen years old. Hagrid told her how the boy had arachnophobia, but had followed spiders into a nest of acromantulas in order to help prove Hagrid innocent at twelve. The year before that Ron set up a caretaker for Hagrid's baby

dragon so that he wouldn't get in trouble with the school. Hagrid had kindly decided that he would not be introducing his class to acromantulas for Ron's sake. Tonks had gone on and on about Ron's dueling abilities while Remus spoke proudly of how Ron protected his pregnant wife.

Hestia followed the trail down the many winding streets and thanked Merlin that it wasn't during the day where people would have been crowding the streets and blocking her path. Not to mention that this was one of the rare mixed towns. The front was that Madura was a small roadhouse community meant for people (muggles) to simply pass on through. The truth though was that it was a place where wizarding families who had muggle relations could live together without having to have separate lives like in England. Muggle technology and wizarding magic was used in conjunction with one another for the comfort of both factions. It was a fascinating place that had interested her for a while. She wasn't sure how she'd cope among all the muggles, but she'd heard from others that it was quite a stress relief not to have to worry about non-magical folk seeing because they were all family of magical folk living there.

If a person didn't have magical relations a strong desire would hit them to move on to the next town. No one performed magic on the main street where muggle travelers passed through, otherwise it was safe. It was the whole reason why the Auror Strategy training had been situated in this particular area because it introduced those wizards who were unused to muggle machinery to the muggle world. You really couldn't function well as an Auror out in the real world if half the places you go to bewildered you.

Hestia stopped in front of the hospital checking her wand. Ron was inside. Whatever danger Ron was in he'd gotten into while working. Rushing to the front desk she pulled out her Auror badge and flashed it to the Healer behind it.

"I need to know where Ron Weasley is right now." Hestia said urgently.

The Healer blinked before nodding and muttering a spell onto the paper in front of her, repeating the name given before looking up.

"He just got out of surgery forty-five minutes ago mam. I don't think he's up for visitors yet, but since you're an Auror I'll inform the doctor that you're here." The Healer said kindly, there was an edge to her voice though, a familiarity with Ron if Hestia had to guess. The woman's words caught up to her.

Hestia froze.

"Surgery? What happened?" she demanded, torn between relief to know that the boy would be okay and fright at knowing he'd been seriously injured. She did not want to be the one to tell Molly Weasley one of her children was in a hospital bed.

"Patient Weasley has been scheduled for surgery since two weeks ago for yesterday evening mam. There were no complications and he's in recovery." The Healer explained patiently. "It says on his form that he wished to keep this private, but we are obligated to inform any Auror of any information they seek no matter the wishes of our patients." The woman added, voice laced with a touch of bitterness.

Hestia stared at the woman in shock.

"What was the surgery for?" She asked in a much softer tone.

Ron had been in Mortal Peril yet the woman said that the surgery went without a hitch. It had been *planned* for weeks. Molly's clock was never wrong. Hestia suddenly felt like she'd jumped into a kiddie pool only to hit the water and find out the bottom didn't exist. A planned surgery was so dangerous that Ron's clock hand had gone to Mortal Peril. A dangerous surgery that Ron had known about, but hadn't informed anyone of.

"Mr. Weasley was suffering from the aftereffects of one of his treatment potions. A toxic tumor had formed that needed to be



ritualistically removed." The Healer read off of the paper in front of her.

Hestia swallowed. Oh Godric. She'd not been expecting this at all.

"He's sick?" Hestia found herself asking, the shock echoing off the walls of the empty hospital reception area.

The woman nodded curtly.

Ron was working in a hospital... that's what she'd been informed of by Shacklebolt, information that had been supplied by Molly Weasley herself. If Ron was a patient... it meant that working there was just a cover story. Her insides squeezed unpleasantly even while she was silently impressed by the boy. No one would be the wiser.

"Can I go and see him?" Hestia asked, now weary.

"You're an Auror mam." The woman said tartly. Wow... someone was rather bitter. "Perhaps England doesn't give such privacy breaking jurisdictions?"

Hestia straightened up and looked the woman straight in the eyes.

"Ronald Weasley is a member of the highest ranking Auror group in England, the Order of the Phoenix. As a fellow member of this elite group of law enforcement I am part of Mr. Weasley's honorary medical visitation rights. I am here to assist in the safety and welfare of one of the few members to survive the recent war in England." Hestia snapped.

If the woman wanted to be difficult then she could play that card as well.

"That's not possible." The healer sniffed. "Mr. Weasley performed training at the Auror center across town before becoming too ill. The boy is freshly out of Hogwarts."

"He is freshly out of a war zone." Hestia snapped. "A war that the boy was thrust into at fifteen when he participated in his first battle. He did not receive official training, but was mercilessly hunted down by Death Eaters for a year and *survived* . Have you heard nothing of the war that split England this past year? Ron didn't *get* to attend his last year of Hogwarts."

The woman before her was shaken up, her head moving from side to side in denial.

"I've personally helped with Ron's treatment. He's never mentioned anything about the war. There's no way he was in the middle of it." The healer denied.

Australia was about as far away from England as one could get, but for this healer who was supposed to be taking care of Ron to not even know her patient was a war veteran disturbed her. It was well known in the Order that all three of the trio were suffering from post war trauma. Even the public knew as much. Everyone knew they had been in the midst of the war from the very beginning to the very end. Here in Australia though, Ron was anonymous.

Feeling around in her bag for the most recent copy of the Daily Prophet, not that recent since she hadn't been in England in over a week, she found it wrinkled up beside her blanket. Leafing through the pages for a few minutes Hestia found the perfect article: 'Has Ron Weasley abandoned the Golden Trio?'

Well perhaps not perfect. She scuffed at the title. Ron Weasley appeared to have simply disappeared overnight. None of his family or the Order were willing to tell the General public where he had gone. Speculation was that a left over Death Eater had killed him or that the trio got tired of him. It talked about the last time he was seen and the many enemies Ron had made during the war. It would get her point across at least.

"I'll give you this in exchange for the room number Ron Weasley is in and I want his medical file as well." Hestia bargained. "Articles on

page 5."

The healer hesitated for a moment, weary of her, but unwilling to outright disobey an Auror. She took the paper, before summoning the file to her.

"He only got out of surgery a bit ago. He'll be asleep and even if you are an Auror you are NOT allowed to wake him. Room 316. Third floor and to your left." The woman told her sternly.

Obviously Ron had already made an impression on the staff. She wasn't the least bit surprised. She nodded and walked away briskly. Making her way up to the room Hestia hesitated only a moment. Walking into the room she felt her breath taken forcefully from her body.

Ron was emaciated.

It suddenly struck her how long it had been since she'd seen the gangly teen standing in the wreckage of Hogwarts. He was incredibly pale, a strong contrast to the tanned skin earned from living in a tent over the course of a year. The blanket covered his body, but his arms were laid bare, scars and all. His left arm was covered in bandages just ending where the long ugly scar caused by Hermione Granger splinching him lay. Both arms lacked the strong muscles she remembered seeing. And his face was gaunt. Deep yellowish black bags were under his eyes weaving a tale of exactly how much sleep he got. Even his eyelids looked darkened.

There were long strands of magic weaving around the boy almost like a cocoon, monitoring his heart, breathing and brain waves. As she watched Hestia noticed that every time the boy's breath hitched the blue magical strands turned an ominous shade of red before evening out to purple then blue.

Hestia shivered.

This was clearly not just an ordinary infection. This surgery was not a small and easy thing like the healer had suggested either. She needed to know all the facts before calling the Weasleys, but if she didn't send some kind of message soon they would both be going to the closest international portkey. Looking at the time Hestia realized that while it felt like a lifetime ago she had only been in the hospital for fifteen minutes. It was still very, very early in the morning.

She sent a patronus out to inform the Weasley's that their son was not in danger as well as a private message to Kingsley to come as soon as possible. Kingsley Shacklebolt was a busy man, but he had made it clear that anything to do with the trio would be handled by him personally. The trio knew and trusted Kingsley and he would not betray that trust by letting strangers handle emergency situations like this one.

It was a sad, but unfortunate case. Most of the Order had been replaced by the younger generation. Almost all of the Order members close to the trio were dead: Moody, Sirius, Lupin, Tonks, Snape, and Dumbledore. The majority was now made up of the Weasley family. Bless their souls, they all almost made it out, except for that poor boy Fred. The poor family had so many other close calls; Arthur nearly dying by Voldemort's snake, Bill's face being sliced up by Fenrir Greyback, Ron being poisoned and both arms badly scarred from the war.

Hestia sat listening to Ron's ragged breaths, watching the ball of magic floating in front of his mouth, monitoring the boy's breathing. What was she supposed to tell Kingsley when he got there? That they hadn't known about this would shatter the man. Godric... What was she supposed to tell Molly? The woman had lost both of her brothers in the last war and a child in this one. How could she tell her that even though the fighting was over one of her children was still battling on?

Hestia resigned herself to spending the next several hours reading medical jargon and hoping she understood at least half of it.

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The first thing Ron did as he woke up from the surgery was shriek in surprise and the slightest bit of terror. Kingsley Shacklebolt sat tiredly beside his bed. Instantly regretting the action Ron held a hand to his still healing stomach as he stared at the tall, broad shouldered Minister of Magic. Wildly looking around Ron was mildly relieved to realize that while there was an Auror he vaguely recognized none of his family was there.

"Ron." Kingsley powerful, weary voice stated.

Dread filled every fiber of his being. They knew. Kingsley at least knew everything. He could see it in the man's eyes and features. Ron tried to sit up, his pride and respect for the man before him demanded it, but he quickly collapsed back onto the pillow. Kingsley immediately raised his hand in a placating gesture.

"Please my friend, do not get up." The man's voice boomed.

' *Like I have a choice.*' Ron thought grouchily. Why now? Why when he was at his weakest point did Kingsley have to come waltzing into his life again.

"How?" Ron croaked, unsurprised that his voice could barely be heard.

Kingsley hurriedly poured a glass of water before helping him into a position where he could at least drink it without choking. He still coughed harshly anyways, his throat parched, and tongue dry. Water splashed across his hospital clothes. When he was finally settled again Kingsley explained.

"Your hand drifted to Mortal Peril."

Ron cursed under his breath. How could he have forgotten the clock? He'd been so used to all of their hands constantly being on Mortal Peril that the thought hadn't even occurred to him to do something about it. He'd focused on covering up the fact that he was in a hospital constantly and hadn't considered that his state might

degrade to the point that he was near death and therefore in 'Mortal Peril.'

"You haven't told my family yet?" Ron rasped.

Kingsley sighed tiredly. They both knew that he hadn't. Ron was asking him why not.

"You are a reasonable and trustworthy member of the Order Ron. If you decided not to tell your family about this then that makes me assume that you have a good reason for your actions. Not only that... You are eighteen years old and live on your own. It would be a show of great disrespect for me to go behind your back and tattle on you." Kingsley said gravely. Ron could tell from his tone of voice that he had considered it. His respect for the man went up a great deal. Kingsley wasn't going to use his position as Minister and head of the Order to try to bully Ron.

"Saying that though," Kingsley said, a silent 'but' coming along that made Ron cringe. "I would like to know your reasoning for not telling anyone, not just your family, but anyone about this."

Ron closed his eyes for several long minutes, fighting against the blackness encircling him. Without opening his eyes Ron spoke.

"Selfish reasons I guess. At first I just didn't want them to have to deal with this on..." Ron's voice left his. The rasping in his throat becoming much worse before disappearing altogether with his voice. Ron grimaced and grit his teeth. Leaning over the bed shakily Ron gripped the cup of water again in shaking hands. The water tipped and sloshed over the sides. Kingsley got up again, and being the ever patient man he was, held the cup to Ron's lips slowly and carefully. Ron gave him a pained, grateful smile.

He felt as if he had a hole in his lip with how much water escaped to dribble down his chin and neck. His ears turned bright red from embarrassment and humiliation. Still, a strong hand stayed at his back while the other kept the cup steady. The water felt heavenly to

his deeply hurting throat. He nodded gratefully when the glass was empty. Kingsley helped him lean back carefully into the bed. The black spots in his eyesight stayed even after the water. His head was pounding and for a long moment he hoped that they would just go away if he waited long enough.

They didn't though. Both Kingsley and the familiar Auror stayed waiting for him to recover. Ron blinked his eyes several times, trying to get his eyesight to focus again, Kingsley stayed slightly fuzzy though. Even slightly blurry the man still appeared severe and expectant.

"At first..." Ron tried again, satisfied when he could hear his voice, despite the rasp. "At first I didn't want them to have... to have to deal with me. Fred's gone. Everyone's hurting. I just... I didn't want them to be forced to take care of me. The wars over... they can go on with their lives you know? And then here I am making... making everything difficult for everyone again. You know? I didn't want that. It would be horrible. They needed time to recover."

The frown lines on Kingsley's face deepened.

Ron let out a croaky laugh that hurt.

"You know it's true." Ron said roughly. "You think... you think Harry and Hermione would be helping you as much... if I were there?"

"They would have been where they needed to be. I would have respected that." Kingsley told him firmly.

Ron grinned up at the man, but he knew his eyes were watery.

"That's what I mean. I needed them, but they needed me not to need them. You've read it haven't you? There's not much of a chance I'll make it. It would hurt them so much worse... to have to see me slowly die..." Ron felt a hot tear slide down his cheek. "... than to receive news one day that I'm dead."

Ron saw the blurry dark skinned fists tighten around fabric.

"You know too, don't you? It would break them." Ron rasped softly.

"Do not resign yourself to death so easily Ronald. You have a forty percent chance of beating this. It would break them more to know that you've accepted death so easily when you even had a single percent chance of making it." Kingsley's deep voice echoed loudly in the quiet room.

"I haven't. I still have dreams and plans and wants. One of my wants though is that if the worst happens that Harry and Hermione don't have to see it. Maybe they would be better off saying goodbye, but..." Ron's voice became thick. He swallowed and closed his eyes for a long moment. "... but I don't want them to see me like this. It's scary to look in the mirror. It's scary to see under the bandages. It's scary vomiting and not knowing if I'm gonna stop. It's scary not being able to get up some days. It's selfish, but I want them to only remember me like how I was before."

The blariness finally went away, throwing Kingsley's features into sharp focus. The man's charcoal colored eyes were baring into his with such compassion and concern that it was almost overwhelming. He wanted Kingsley to understand where he was coming from. He wanted the man to know that he wasn't not telling them out of disregard for what they wanted but out of a need to protect them and himself from what was happening.

"Excuse me Kingsley." The familiar Auror said loudly, her own voice sounding thick. "I need to... I need a moment."

Then she was gone. Ron peered towards the door in confusion. Kingsley gave him a tight lipped smile.

"Hestia is a very mothering type woman. It's hard for me to hear you talk like that so for her I imagine it's worse." Kingsley explained softly.



Hestia. One of the Aurors who escorted the Dursleys and she was part of Harry's guard just before fifth year too wasn't she? Turning back to Kingsley Ron felt the burning desire to ask him, but he'd been needing to know.

"Are you going to keep my secret? Will you be able to the next time you see my parents?" Ron asked, trying hard not to let the fear show.

Kingsley's hands folded in front of him. The man was giving him a searching and calculated stare. He would have squirmed if he had the energy to.

"Their waiting for me in the Burrow at this very minute." Kingsley admitted. Ron cringed. "I had to go through five different teams emergency port keys around the world in order to get to you."

Kingsley paused. Deeply contemplative.

Ron waited for the man to continue, having no other choice, but to have patience.

"I heard that you were living in an apartment. You're paying your own medical bills. You're taking care of yourself against the wishes of the doctors. You're putting yourself in debt because you can only pay a small amount." Kingsley stated.

Ron was completely thrown by the change of subject.

"My family's not rich Kingsley." Ron rasped, anger dripping from his voice. "Even if I did tell them it would just be my family in debt instead of me."

"The origin of this infection comes from your scars from the battle in the department of Mysteries correct?" Kingsley asked. "Against death eaters?"

"Wha.." Ron began, clearly not keeping up with the Minister's flow of logic. "Yes. That's why it's so bad... because the dark magic festered inside my scars for so long."

Kingsley smirked, seemingly triumphant from getting this confession directly from Ron.

"So this entire illness comes from fighting for the sake of your country. You got sick because of Death Eaters." Kingsley stated firmly.

"Yeah..." Ron agreed slowly. "I was hit with a curse that caused the brain to attack me so I guess you could say it that way."

"Therefore." Kingsley stated, far more loudly than necessary. "You fully qualify for the medical program designed for post war victims. All of your bills, debt and basic living can be covered by the government through paperwork until it can be proven that you are fully healed from the illness caused by Death Eaters. It is the government's debt to pay its civilians back for its failure to protect them."

Ron gaped at the man.

"No." Ron snapped. Weasley's, no matter how bad the situation, never went on *welfare* programs. They were not charity cases. They did not accept handouts. It just wasn't done. Kingsley knew this. They worked for every scrap they had. They were a proud family who knew that they didn't have much, but could take great pride for having earned it.

"Then I guess Molly and Arthur will find themselves with a portkey straight to the hospital in a few hours." Kingsley said with a shrug. "There's nothing I can do if they decide they need more than just my word to assure themselves that you're doing okay."

"Are you blackmailing me?" Ron rasped incredulously.

"Yes." Kingsley stated bluntly. "And you'll be living in the hospital as an inpatient. You're killing yourself by living on your own."

"No I'm not. I'm doing fine." Ron rasped angrily, his throat informed him that it was not okay to speak loudly.

"Your Healer says otherwise. I'll be checking up on you weekly as well." Kingsley informed him.

"You..." Ron started, unsure what he should say. "You can't do this. What was all that stuff about me being eighteen and able to make reasonable decisions?"

"I'm respecting your decisions. And as long as you respect *my* decisions Harry Potter and Hermione Granger won't receive a patronus from me concerning a mission they need to perform here in Australia about twenty minutes from this location." Kingsley added, almost as if it was an afterthought.

"You wouldn't dare!" Ron hissed.

"Would you like to test that theory Ronald?" The Ministry of Magic asked, raising an arched eyebrow.

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Ron pulled at the irritating wrist band that told everyone he lived as an inpatient at the local hospital.

Scowling at the tight piece of metal did nothing to make it go away.

It had been several weeks since his removal from his apartment, but Ron still wasn't use to it. He was allowed 'free time' outside of the hospital as long as he could convince one of the staff members or his friends to accompany him. It was demoralizing and humiliating. He'd even been restricted to how much time he could spend outside of the hospital. Apparently it was strenuous to his health to be 'out and about' for too long. Healer Blake had been far too perky, Ron decided, as the man explained these things.

He felt like a child who'd gotten caught doing something awful and was on lockdown by his parents. He still couldn't believe Kingsley would blackmail him like that; threatening to tell his parents about his illness if he didn't enter the hospital. After everything he'd done for the man this was how he was repaid. If he survived and became an Auror he was going to make sure he irritated Kingsley as much as possible. Ron pulled at the band again.

Not that he wasn't grateful, but the whole idea of being on a welfare program left a nasty taste in the back of his throat. His parents would be ashamed of him if they knew. A Weasley taking aid from the government because he couldn't care for himself. Ron rolled his shoulders carefully. It helped with the pain that his potion didn't take care of and the slower he moved the better it felt. One of the healers had given him a series of exercises meant to work the muscles that would send out chemicals in his body easing the pain. It exhausted him, but the end result was worth it. Ron rubbed the skin under the band.

"Stop it. You're going to cause a rash or something." Traux mumbled through his bite of sweet and sour chicken.

Ron maturely stuck his tongue out at him.

"My mother use to tell me she'd grab my tongue right out of my mouth if I didn't keep it inside my head." Traux said with a laugh.

"My mum once jinxed my tongue to stay out until it was like sandpaper, never stuck my tongue out at her again." Ron admitted with a fond smile.

"She sounds like quite a woman." Traux said with a full bellied laugh.

"She's had seven children and each one of them has a healthy fear of her. She's definitely something." Ron drawled.

They were sitting in the Dusk café. He'd been forced to quit, but came often to see Rose and her mother as well as talk with Antea

and Traux. As an inpatient to the hospital he was required to have someone with him while outside of the hospital. This meant that he either needed to get one of the healers or nurses to come with him or a friend to escort him. A constant babysitter. Eighteen years old and he needed someone to be constantly with him to watch him. At least with Antea or Traux he was treated like he wasn't going to break at a single poke.

"What about your dad." Traux asked with a wry smile.

"Caldest man you'll ever meet. No idea what attracted them to each other." Ron admitted. "Somehow they make the perfect couple though. Suppose if they were both scary and intimidating we'd all have run for the hills."

"My dad's really strict." Traux confessed. He turned to Ron and scowled. "'You'll never be able to get into the Auror program if you don't perfect this spell boy!' It was always boy when he was instructing me, but he never said it in front of my mom. My mom heard him once and referred to him as 'that man' for three weeks."

Ron cackled as he took a tentative slurp of his soup. His stomach turned unpleasantly and his throat seemed to close up the moment the liquid touched his tongue. He gagged slightly, barely keeping down the single spoonful. Sighing in disgruntlement Ron put the spoon back into the bowl.

"No go." Traux said sympathetically.

"Just a 'go' to the bathroom if I take another sip. Even the smell is making me nauseous." Ron groaned.

"They're going to put you on the tube again." Traux stated knowingly.

Ron moaned into his arms.

"At least try drinking the tea." Traux added.

Ron nodded gloomily.

"How's training going?" Ron asked, desperately wanting a change in topic.

"We've got an Exam in a week or so. It's supposed to determine whether we're capable of making it to the next level of training."

Ron grimaced remembering that only a few people were ever good enough to make it to the end.

"You take it at the end of October?" Ron asked, knowing that Harry and Hermione must be freaking out by now.

"We're not kicked out of the program if we don't pass with flying colors, but we are sent back to the beginning. We've got two chances. It's just that it's looked down upon if you don't pass it the first time." Traux said grumpily.

"The world won't end if you don't make it the first time mate. You'll get there." Ron stated, his voice suddenly dropped a few pitches, giving a good imitation of the Auror lecturer. "Outwitting your opponent depends on being able to come up with as many possible answers and then having the ability to know which one is best! There are a thousand possibilities in this life and giving up because one failed makes you not only lazy, but an idiot."

Traux grinned.

"Thanks mate. I needed that. You sound scarily like him you know. Can you teach me that? It would be funny as all hell to pull that trick out of my sleeve when interrogating criminals." Traux mused.

"What trick?" A voice piped up.

Ron turned to see Rose sitting in the chair beside him. She scooted the chair over so that the wood clicked against his own chair. Traux gave the little girl an amused glance before winking at Ron.

"Hi Rose. I was just asking Ron if he uses his talent at imitating voices when he reads you stories at night." Traux told her with an easy smile.

Ron rolled his eyes. Traux had a habit of teasing Ron about how much Rose loved spending time with him. He thought it was the funniest thing in the world that Rose seemed to have a crush on him. Ron insisted that she just looked up to him as a big brother.

Beside him Rose nodded eagerly. She started telling Traux about the many characters Ron acted out. She too tried imitating the voices, but got frustrated and pouted when she couldn't. She turned to Ron with big, puppy dog eyes and he suddenly had a sinking feeling. Traux snickered.

"Can you imitate the snake in the story you read me a few days ago?" Rose asked. "It was so cool!"

"Yes Ronnie." Traux pleaded childishly. "I want to hear it too."

Ron sent him a withering glare, before smiling at Rose.

"What do you want me to say?" Ron asked, purposefully not looking at Traux.

Rose developed a thinking pose, her lips jutting out comically as she considered this.

"Telling me about your day, but use you snakey voice." Rose declared after a minute.

Traux snickered again.

His snakey voice was Parseltongue in English. It took a lot of concentration. Giving Traux a sharp kick under the table Ron took a breath a started.

He ended up spending most of the afternoon imitating different voices. Egged on by Traux and applauded by Rose. His ears turned

red in embarrassment when customers started clapping alongside the little girl. Rose beamed at him proudly.

It was worth it.

---

*Ron wiggled and squirmed on the ground before letting out an ear piercing scream. They were tightening around him. Long tendrils crushing him against a grayish thing that smelt like ash. Ron leaned his head away from it, but couldn't escape. He felt his back creak under the pressure as it tightened further around his waist and shoulders. Then it came.*

*It was a sickening sensation like he was being touched all over before he felt himself thrust forward. He screamed again as his body felt like it was lit with fire. Blood was seeping beneath him, making everything slick and sticky, the tendril like arms burning and cutting at the same time into his skin. He couldn't see any of the others at all anymore. Instead a dark figure stood above him; a man who was literally draped in shadows. Ron tried kicking out at him, but his efforts were simply laughed at.*

*Dark, claw like fingernails traced his arms where the tendrils lay almost lazily now. The dark figures face fell into the light just enough for Ron to see sharp teeth smiling down at him. Suddenly the places the figure traced began to glow ominously with a dark light, almost like a negative photograph his father showed him once. Ron slammed his head forward, colliding their foreheads together, but the thing simply dissipated and reappeared on his other side. Screaming in agony Ron gasped and cried out as the figure traced his claw along every tendril wrapped around his body.*

*" Ahhhhh... Stop it! Stop it." Ron screamed.*

*Where were the others? Neville, Ginny, Luna, Harry, Hermione...*

*It just smiled as it finished tracing the last of the tendrils of the brain creature crushing his body. Ron grit his teeth as the figure leaned*



*forward, its shadows touching his skin, causing the fiery like pain coursing through him to spike. The scream that tore through him echoed eerily through the empty room.*

*" I've waited so long..." The figure hissed into his ear.*

*Blinding pain ripped through his body.*

Ron screamed as he sat up to see nothing but darkness around him. Blindly searching for his wand Ron felt his hand tighten around a stick on the bed beside him.

"Lumus!" Ron roared.

The room filled with light so bright that Ron was forced to close his eyes immediately. Ron cursed, repeating the spell more softly, before looking around.

His hospital room.

Ron slumped against the headboard, bringing his legs up to his chest and burying his face into his knees.

*' Just a dream. It was just a dream. Nothing to freak about. Just a dream.'* Ron told himself quietly.

It was unnerving quiet, but Ron was thankful for that. It meant that Rose wasn't in the bed next to him. No child to traumatize with his nightmares. Pulling the blanket around him Ron absently looked around for his hoodie. He must of passed out after the last treatment. That was the only way he didn't sleep with it on.

Spotting the large jacket draped over a chair on the other side of the room Ron gingerly got out of bed. The blanket slipped slightly, revealing silver scars around one arm from the ministry's brain creature, before Ron hurriedly brought it back up. Even when he was by himself Ron disliked showing his badly scarred arms.

Rubbing at his eyes absently Ron grabbed the hoodie and pulled it on over his head. Wandering out of his room Ron padded over to the night nurse, a woman named Pam who would let him sit outside by him-self if he snuck her Milano cookies. She wasn't Antea who would take him up flying, but he still liked her.

"Morning Pam."

Pam worked nights and slept during the day so while Ron had just gotten up from a nightmare in the middle of the night she had only woken up a few hours ago.

"Morning Ron dear. Need some fresh air?" She asked absently, frowning down at her muggle puzzle sheet. Ron leaned forward over the desk to see what the puzzle was. Reading it upside down and looking up.

"Its..."

"Shuuuuuu! If I still don't have it when you get back *then* you can tell me." She muttered.

"Actually I just want some tea." Ron told her. "You want me to get you some too?"

"Apple Cider dear."

Walking down to the cafeteria Ron rolled his shoulders out of habit. The pain potion was working fine. His body felt half frozen with cold, but over the months he'd learned to deal with it. People outside of the hospital still gave him weird looks when he walked outside with his heavy jacket, but the looks turned to bewilderment when his breath puffed out like he was in Antarctica.

"Mopsy?" Ron called out.

A tall house elf with longer than normal ears appeared out of nowhere.

"Mr. Weasley sir! Is you very cold tonight sir? Let me make you a cup of nice warm tea." Mopsy demanded earnestly.

"Thank you. Healer Pam would like some apple cider too please." Ron added as he cuddled into one of the armchairs in the cafeteria.

"Of course sir, right away!"

The house elf disappeared into the kitchen, reappearing soon after with a large mug of warm tea.

"Would Mr. Weasley like something to eat? Something light for you? Some company?" Mopsy implored.

Mopsy knew about all the inpatients needs. The house elf prided her-self in 'making people feel better.' Several months ago on one of his overnight stays he'd asked her to sit with him and tell him about her day because he was very lonely. She apparently had dealt with patients who had no one to visit them before because her features saddened. Since then whenever Ron wandered into the kitchens at night she would sit with him and talk.

He had made sure to tell Hermione all about the old house elf. She was different than the ones that stayed inside the kitchen all day who shirked away from him. Then again he had never met a house elf as old as her either. Not even Kreature, who was bloody ancient, could match the deep wrinkles ingrained on the tiny creature.

"I'd love some company thanks." Ron told her.

"So I get you something light to eat yes?" Mopsy nodded, outright ignoring his avoidance of that question. "Then I sit with you."

Ron resignedly nodded.

They talked for a good half an hour, Mopsy coxing him to eat a broth soup after Ron admitted that eating toast hurt his throat. In return

Ron retold her, her favorite story: Dobby saving them from Malfoy Manor. He really missed that house elf.

Walking back towards his wing with a hot cup of cider Ron placed it down beside Pam. Sitting down in the swirly seat beside her Ron looked down at the paper.

Anger or wrath. Three letters.

"Ire." Ron muttered.

"Damn it."

# Daddy Ch9

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

A/N: When you plan a chapter out, give it a framework, and stick to that framework... you end up with a chapter that really should be divided into two. The problem with that is that there are a series of letters in this chapter framing the storyline and plot that would organize terribly into two chapters. Therefore you get one very long chapter.

Chapter 9: Daddy

"Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."

**Albus Dumbledore**

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

" Sirius?"

*The man turned to see Ron standing in the doorway of his room. The boy was wearing a shirt a size too small for him, bless poor Molly's soul, and worn down pants with tiny rips along its length. Sirius gestured for Ron to come in and join him. The boy did so hesitantly. He seemed very uncertain about approaching him on his own, no doubt use to Harry's constant presence whenever they talked. Hermione had no such qualms. He rather enjoyed her boldness.*

*Ron sat on the edge of the bed rather than directly beside him, frowning not at Sirius himself, but at some point behind him. Glancing back curious, Sirius raised an eyebrow when all he saw was a blank wall, clearly they were not seeing the same thing. His lips twitched, threatening to turn upwards in a smile when the young boy continued to stare off into space.*

*" Was there something that you wanted Ron?" Sirius asked.*

*His lips really did turn up into a smile when Ron jerked and looked at him with ears burning with embarrassment. They had been in the same house together for several weeks yet rarely talked to each other. Sirius tended to discuss Order business with the incoming and outgoing members while Ron had been forced to spend to spend all of his time either doing summer school work or avoiding the twin's unmerciful amount of pranks.*

*Sirius didn't agree with the situation at all. Locking up two seventeen year olds, a sixteen year old and fifteen year old all summer in a house was borderline torture in his opinion. Even he had managed to sneak out a few times.*

*" I've been thinking a lot." Ron began. "Well I mean... There's been something I've wanted to ask you... something you might consider private. I don't want to make you mad or anything so if it's too personal you can tell me to shut up."*

*" It's fine Ron. I'm sure I won't be offended." Sirius tried very hard not to laugh. Really, the boy reminded him of Remus so much sometimes. Well... Remus with Molly Weasley's famous temper anyway.*

*" It's just... It's about Peter Petigrew." Ron mumbled, clearly expecting him to blow up.*

*" What about him Ron?" Sirius asked in his calmest voice.*

*" Well... he's the reason why You-Know-Who is back right? He did that ritual that brought him back. You and Harry's dad and Lupin and wormtail were all really good friends though... I mean what caused him to... do you know why he did it? Why he betrayed you guys?" Ron asked quietly.*

*Sirius hesitated, not quite expecting that.*

*" This is something that Remus would be able to explain much better than I. Both James and Remus always told me I was too trusting. I just think that I don't pay enough attention. I never saw the signs like they did Ron. That is why when Remus discovered Peter to still be alive he immediately suspected foul play. To me I saw nothing until after it was too late. The behavior Peter showed that night was so different and cowardly it shocked me." Sirius answered honestly.*

*" Oh..." Ron said quietly.*

*Sirius scrutinized Ron carefully. The boy was tugging at his too short sleeves with a hard glint in his eyes. Once again he was looking everywhere, but at Sirius.*

*" Why do you ask Ron?"*

*The boy looked up at him, his lips thinning into a straight line, before looking down at the floor again.*

*" I just keep thinking... is there something that could break me like that? There had to be something that happened right? You don't just betray your friends. What if a second war does come and I'm not strong enough..." Ron gestured outward, as if to encompass everything that he couldn't imagine a war would bring.*

*Sirius moved forward and gripped Ron's shoulder tightly, kneeling down and forcing Ron's eyes to meet his.*

*" You know what I see when I look at you?" Sirius asked sharply.*

*Startled, Ron shook his head, eyes never leaving his.*

*" I instantly think of Remus. Flustered Remus who doesn't understand why we spent so much time perfecting animagi forms to be with him when he transformed so he didn't have to be alone. You think there's something wrong with you and don't understand why people would stand by you even though you wouldn't hesitate to stand by them. I see the boy who stood before me on a broken leg to*

*say I had to go through him to get to his best friend. I see the person who was placed at the bottom of the lake because you are the person who Harry considers most important in his life. Not me or Hermione or his crush of the moment; his best friend." Sirius told him sternly.*

*Ron opened his mouth to say something, but then closed it and looked away from him. His grip on the boy's shoulder tightened. Sirius reached out with his left hand and firmly gripped Ron's chin, forcing it towards him again.*

*" I didn't see the signs in Peter, but neither can I remember a time when I was proud of him either. Maybe that was a sign in itself. You though... I trust you to watch my godson's back. I'm proud of the many things I've not only seen you do, but what other people have told me. The things that you've done for so many people including Harry... Peter never did that. And don't you ever think you're not strong enough."*

*There was a loud crashing sound from downstairs. Both Sirius and Ron jumped a bit from surprise. Molly Weasley's loud voice boomed through the hallways all the way up to the bedrooms followed by Hermione's much higher pitched voice.*

*" Hermione's here." Ron said unnecessarily.*

*Sirius grinned, letting go of the boy and standing up, before offering Ron a hand. Ron took it readily.*

*" You should go greet her then." Sirius told him gently.*

*" Yeah." Ron walked to the door, but paused before leaving. Ron didn't turn around to face him as he added. "Thank you. I mean... you didn't have to."*

*" No, I most certainly didn't. And I wouldn't have given you the time of day if I didn't think it was true. You can ask Remus if you like. I'm quite the shallow bugger." Sirius announced.*



*Hermione's voice sounded again, much closer than before, but Ron didn't seem in a hurry to greet her. Sirius was taken aback by the deep gaze Ron gave him when he did turn around. It was the look he'd been giving the wall and floor before, but fully concentrated on him.*

*" I really don't know how anyone could have thought you betrayed them Sirius." Ron told him sternly, honesty dripping from his entire being.*

*Then he was gone.*

*Sirius sat heavily back on the bed, leaning back to stare up at the ceiling. The former Azkaban prisoner sniffled.*

*" Oh bugger. I hope no one heard that."*

---

Harry paced nervously back and forth. The other Auror trainees waiting for their exam further down the hallway. He and Hermione hadn't been able to study the codes or correct procedures for handling criminals or any of the negotiation tactics... He was going to completely fail the written portion of the exam. Not to mention that while they were going on missions few people were telling them how they were supposed to conduct the said missions. Even if he and Hermione accomplished their goals that didn't mean how they accomplished them was how the Auror examiners wanted them to do it. They were royally screwed.

Harry's pacing increased in speed. He hadn't had time! He and Hermione spent their week off taking care of Teddy and researching the prophecy he received from Tralawney. Then Kingsley had sent them on more missions and they just... they didn't have time. Who'd even heard of having an exam at the end of October! Weren't they supposed to get at least another month! Ridiculous traditions.

"Harley?" A voice boomed.

Harry jumped and looked back to see one of the other young men get up nervously and follow the proctor into the room. Sighing and running his fingers through his hair Harry sat down in one of the chairs, much to the relief of the other Auror trainees. Harry couldn't help, but chuckle into his hand.

Apparently seeing the boy who lived pacing because of a test had the others freaked out.

So when a giant light suddenly burst out of nowhere a dozen men and two women jumped out of their skins with wands raised including Harry himself.

Panic faded away as he recognized Ron's patronus. Putting his wand away Harry signaled to the others that it was alright. The terrier excitedly circled Harry wagging its tail before sitting in front of Harry obediently. Happiness filled Harry as he stared at the light creature before him. It had been a while since he'd seen the tiny dog. When Ron's voice came from the dog Harry's smile turned into a full blown grin.

"Private message for Harry Potter."

The voice was hoarse and low, but beautifully familiar. The voice of a person he hadn't heard in several months. Harry immediately got up to follow the dog into a private room. His grin fell a bit as he noticed a trail of darkness intermingling with Ron's patronus. The backside of the dog seemed to be deteriorating, fading in and out of existence, even as they walked. It left a bad taste in his mouth as Harry was reminded of Tonk's patronus; A dejected wolf. A patronus reflected the state of a person's mind.

Now incredibly worried Harry stepped up his pace and closed the door behind him. The dog's tail appeared to be wagging very fast, but since it was breaking apart before solidifying it was difficult to tell. Harry nodded to the patronus. The dog opened its mouth to deliver the message.

*" Hey mate. I know you're freaking out right now, but you'll be fine. I'm sorry I'm not there for you right now, but you just have to remember that this test is nothing. It's just people who want you to demonstrate your skill and answer some questions. It's not the end of the world if you don't pass a paper test the first time. You've been really busy doing more important things. Kingsley isn't going to suddenly take you off the squad and ban you from becoming an Auror if you can't tell him how to be nice when talking to prisoners. You don't need to be perfect mate. Whatever those bozos... ignore them. Give yourself a break. You don't need to be Auror of the year... few months after starting training... honestly okay if you have to take the test a second time Harry. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. You'll be..."*

The dog had been getting more and more unstable the longer the message went on until it finally disintegrated. Harry was torn between worry about what that could mean to a feeling of deep gratitude and relief towards Ron. He felt better. A great deal better in fact.

Everyone from Mrs. Weasley to Kingsley told him that he would pass with no effort. They expected him to be able to do everything and still be on top as well. They had absolute confidence in his abilities. The press had been unbearable lately. Badgering him about when he would become a full-fledge official Auror. Ginny reassuring him that he would do 'magnificently' at being an Auror and that he would pass all of his tests easily.

And here was Ron telling him that if he didn't pass the first time it wouldn't be the end of the world. Here was Ron telling him that it was okay if he didn't get it right immediately. Here was Ron reminding him that he was only human and he didn't *have* to do anything at all. He wasn't just Harry Potter boy who lived... he was a person who could choose and who made mistakes. He wasn't perfect. His breath came out shakily.

Head in his hands Harry was distinctly reminded of all the times he and Hermione had put Ron down for reminding them of that fact.

Ron who always shot down their ideas when they were unrealistic and they called a pessimist because of it. Ron telling Hermione that the world wasn't going to change immediate and exactly how you wanted it to in concerns to the house elves. Ron telling him that he couldn't do the Hocrux hunt by himself. That he was being silly for thinking that the war revolved around him. He always reminded them when they were trying to take on too much too quickly. Where Ron knew his limitations both he and Hermione would keep pushing till they broke.

Looking at the spot where the patronus had been Harry stood up. He hadn't even known how much he needed those words. He knew that Ron had known about the exams, but to know exactly what to say when he wasn't here was reassuring in itself. Ron was still his old self. He knew that of course, Ron wasn't going to change just because he was in a different country away from them, but it felt good to hear confirmation. It felt good to hear his best friend's voice again after so long.

"Potter!" The gruff voice called.

Startled Harry walked out of the room and towards the proctor. He was relaxed now. This wasn't a big deal. He would be okay even if he didn't get the best marks. He just had to keep that in mind. Harry smiled politely at the man before walking through the door with a confident and proud air. As the door closed he could have sworn he'd seen a small dog wagging its tail in approval.

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*Harry, I've been trying really hard to find a way to tell yo u and Hermione something, but I honestly just didn't have the guts to for a while. I really like working in the hospital. I quit Strategy training and want to continue interning here. That's it. That's what I wanted to say. I'm not going to classes anymore, but I'm not coming home anytime soon. I like being away from all the after war stuff. It's really peaceful here. I hope you can forgive me. -Ron*

---

"Can't believe that you've never celebrated Halloween before." Ron muttered as he fixed the witch's hat on Rose's head. "I mean I know you're a squib, but that's no reason not to."

Rose pulled away grinning at Ron and twirling in her black dress. They were both in the hospital, in the large room they use to share before Ron was moved into one of the inpatient rooms. Rose had been suffering difficulty breathing and had been admitted for an overnight stay.

"Poor kids stuck in a hospital on Halloween night. It ain't right I tell you." Ron bemoaned to the nurse.

The nurse ignored him and continued to fidget with the potions equipment beside Rose's bed. She'd been assigned to Rose's care that night because the girl's regular nurse was home sick. Ron gave the woman an irritated glance at the lack of care before turning to Rose again.

"Are you going to get in trouble again?" Rose whispered giddily.

"Not if you don't say anything." Ron told her with a mischievous wink.

He had turned her hospital gown black when he wasn't supposed to be doing magic anymore. The patronus he'd sent to Harry had caused him to black out. Apparently the treatment had weakened him to a degree that it was actually dangerous for him to perform magic now. A little spell wouldn't hurt though. Ron himself was dressed in warm winter socks, thick sweat pants, his maroon sweat shirt and his blue hoodie.

Doctor Blake had upped his pain potion dose when Ron told him he was experiencing back pain yesterday despite the medicine. He was scheduled for another examination and the third treatment towards his lungs would be postponed if his back was in greater need of taking care of.

It wasn't something he was particularly keen on. It would mean he would have to deal with his recovering chest and a fresh open wound on his back. Sleeping would be even more miserable than it already was.

"Come on. Mopsy told me that she has a surprise for us." Ron whispered.

Rose grabbed his hand excitedly, the increase in breathing causing a deep wheezing sound along with each intake.

"She needs her potions Mr. Weasley." The nurse snapped. "And it is not good for her to be walking around."

Ron stopped. He gave the woman an irritated glare.

"She doesn't take the potion for another forty five minutes. We're going to the cafeteria." Ron told her, pointing down the hall to show how ridiculous she was being. "So we'll be back when she needs it."

"But she shouldn't be walking." The nurse insisted stiffly.

Ron looked down at Rose whose face was crestfallen before glancing back at the woman. Rose was still wheezing. The nurse looked triumphant, happy to put Ron in his place. Just like Percy looked when he thought you were about to fold to his wishes. He knelt down beside Rose and smiled reassuringly. Wrapping his arms around the back of her legs Ron lifted her up into his arms. A sharp pain split through his back, but Ron grunted and sucked in a breath to keep from yelping.

"Mr. Weasley you should not be..." The startled nurse began shrilly, but stopped at the withering glare he sent her way.

"We are going down the hallway. We are going to celebrate Halloween. We are going to be back. It's NOT a big deal. Just because we're sick doesn't mean we should stop living." Ron growled.

He felt Rose's arms wrap around his neck and smiled at her. Leaving the room with as much dignity as he could muster Ron made sure the cafeteria doors were fully shut before putting Rose down. The moment her feet touched the ground Ron fell beside her breathing hard.

"Are you okay?" Rose asked faintly.

Ron nodded hurriedly.

"Yeah... just being an idiot." Ron said stretching out.

"Oh Mr. Weasley are you okay?" Squeaked a voice.

"Fine. I'm fine." Ron announced, getting up.

"Well if Mr. Weasley says so." Mopsy said uncertainly. "Come! Come! I have special treat for Halloween. Mrs. Olsen is already in kitchen!"

"Mrs. Olsen's here too?" Rose wheezed happily.

"And Master Sulto says he will come too." Mopsy sang happily, overjoyed at the abundance of people she could oversee tonight.

"Oh joy! Sulto the bletcher..." Ron trailed off at Rose's curious look. "... ah... bitter. Sulto the bitter old man. Sounds fantastic."

"What does bletcher mean?" Rose asked as they were lead into the kitchen.

A table with several different deserts sat on top of the table set out for exactly four people. Mopsy threw out her hands proudly.

"Oh look Rose! Mopsy made mint cake! That's your favorite." Ron proclaimed.

A look of utter delight spread across the little girls face as she practically jumped into one of the chairs and beamed back at him

and thanked Mopsy.

"That was a close call Mr. Weasley." A man muttered as he passed Ron into the kitchen.

"Ahehe... hi Mr. Sulto."

---

*I honestly don't know what to say. This isn't like you at all. You've always wanted to be an Auror, haven't you? Quitting and leaving me and Hermione... Merlin Ron this is gonna tear her apart. What are you doing mate? This is... if you want to work at a hospital that's fine. You know we wouldn't have any problem with that you git. If you wanted to do that you should have just told us, but you can work at the hospital here. Please just... whatever your problem is just... either tell us what it is or get over it and come home.*

-Harry

---

*You can't be serious. Ron how could you? You promised me... us that you would never leave us again. You promised! You said you'd never leave us like you did last year. Now you're... You want away from the after war stuff? This is your home Ron! Running away isn't going to make the problems go away. You know that! You know that it takes hard work, but we have each other! So what if you want to heal people instead of being out on the field you nit! We don't care... we've never cared. We would never be mad at you for picking a different career than us! Dear lord, why **do you have to be so dense?***

**-Hermione**

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*Stop freaking out. I'll still be gone for the same amount of time. It's just a different career field. You're making a big deal of out of nothing. -Ron*

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Antea had been quiet lately. The boisterous, borderline rude, young woman walked around with a contemplative look on her face. Ron didn't mind though, as of late he'd found it tiring to talk for too long. Dr. Blake was getting frustrated with him. He wasn't eating enough. Didn't pay enough attention to when he needed to take his medicine. Didn't drink enough to keep himself hydrated and he was vomiting up everything he did manage to eat. He'd been informed that if he continued to lose weight that his privileges concerning leaving the hospital would be taken away.

So their afternoon walk was taken in silence. Neither wanting to talk, but being comfortable without conversation none the less. Ron let her lead. They took a lot of breaks, stopping at park benches and shops along the way, until they eventually ended up in an old cemetery. Ron didn't ask why they were there, just thankful to be away from the bleak hospital room. When Antea finally stopped in front of one of the graves Ron felt as if the air had been punched out of his lungs.

Hugo Cecily

"I thought he was a year ahead of me in Auror training." Ron said quietly.

"He was." Antea told him with a shrug. "He just never finished."

"Why'd you take me here out of the blue like this?" Ron asked.

"Yee look like me brother. I told you that when we first met remember? Just whiter. He was really tall and lanky too. Big hands like yours." Antea said.

"Why'd you lie? You said you came here because you had no one else." Ron said, trying to understand. "You told me how he was doing whenever I asked. You said he was doing great. You've been telling me that you go to visit him all the time."

"I don't have anyone else and I do visit him a lot. I didn't feel like tell'in ya the truth, but today I felt like com'in here with ya. Wanted you to be here with me for his birthday." Antea told him with a shrug.

Ron opened his mouth and closed it. When Antea sat on the ground Ron found himself sitting next to her. Gently Ron placed his hand around her shoulder in a one sided hug. He felt a deep shock reverberating inside of him, but at the same time he wasn't the least bit surprised. He wasn't surprised by her, but the fact that a person he'd been hearing and talking about as if he was alive was dead. This way of revealing it was so undramatic and simple that now that it was done with Ron couldn't imagine Antea doing it in any other fashion. She was the complete opposite to Hermione in that way. So rather than make a big deal of it Ron just sat there with her until both their butts were far passed numb.

"So you only started talking to me because of my dashing good looks?" Ron asked eventually.

Antea chuckled humorless.

"'Fraid so boyo. You're lucky your charm didn't scare me away." Antea said softly.

"Why didn't it?" Ron asked raising both eyebrows.

"It's the coffee boyo. Who'd get rid of a friend that can get them free coffee in the wee hours of the morn'in?"

"You have to have nerves of steel to drink that shit."

Antea smiled, a genuine one this time, eyes going back to the grave.

"I guess that's why I keep you around boyo. Not many o people be willing ta sit here for three hours while I stare at a grave with a hand around me shoulder. Yer a good kid."

Disgruntled Ron gave her a light shove.

"Do I sound like a kid? I'm eighteen, I've got a deep voice and I'm six foot two thank you very much." Ron groaned.

"Didn't mean to offend your masculineliness boyo. I should 'ave known you'd be sensitive about that." Antea said, holding up her hands in surrender.

"I'm not sensitive. What do you mean you should have known?" Ron asked incredulously.

"Well I think it's obvious you're lacking in certain manly parts. Them boxers were a size too small to give much of anything air to breathe eh?" Antea said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"Anybody would be 'sensitive' about such an issue."

Ron's ears burned bright red as he looked at her in horror.

"That's... how could you... that's not right!" Ron sputtered indignantly.

"Traux would have thought it was funny." Antea sniffed.

"Traux thinks anything picking fun of me is funny. I don't see why I'm friends with either of you." Ron muttered.

"Hm." Antea answered, spreading her legs in front of her. "I should have brought flowers."

Unperturbed by the rapid change in topics Ron simply nodded. They fell into silence again, but felt no need to break it. As the tip of the sun touched the earth spreading an abundance of color across the sky Antea spoke up again in a hushed voice.

"What's it like to have such a big family? Where ya know that you'll never be alone?"

Ron pressed his lips together in thought.

"It's like... this deep reassurance that if you ever screw up, if something awful happens to you, you can always go home. Not a physical home... just... their all homes that you can go to." Ron said slowly, picking his words carefully.

"Why aren't they here Ron? Why aren't they with ya?" Antea demanded quietly.

Ron looked at her in surprise. Antea rarely ever used his name.

"Me brother didn't owl me. He was in the hospital for two weeks after getting hit by a nasty curse and he never got anyone to get me. He just kept bleeding from this horrible wound along his leg and 'e never... the bleedin' idiot never sent for me and he died alone." Antea admitted bitterly. "Only person in the whole world I got and 'e's got to be a damn fool. Dying without me like tha."

"You can't live your life around a grave. Moving all the way here just so you can visit a grave? Antea... that's..." Ron trailed off sadly.

"Can't have a family o me own boyo. I got nothing better to live life around." Antea said, pulling grass from the ground absentmindedly.

"What do you mean?" Ron questioned.

"Infertile. Can't 'ave any kids of me own. I don't want to adopt. I want a lass or lad o me own and of me own blood." Antea growled. "I want me brother back. I want a family so big I don't ever 'ave to worry about being alone again." She tossed the grass outwards where it fluttered uselessly onto the ground.

Ron didn't know what to say so he just stayed quiet. His mum would have been devastated to be infertile. It would be worse than death for her.

"I've been thinkin' for a while boyo... about all the things you've said about your family. It don't add up boyo. I'm gonna ask you again and I want you to be honest. Why aren't they here?"

Ron flinched.

"I've seen you writing them letters, them death notes." Antea sent him a sharp glare. "I've seen write your will. I see you reading their long letters to you over and over again. I heard you talking to Traux the other day, discussing the merits of telling your lass, that Hermione that she should move on. It makes me think that they don't know a damn thing about what's going on."

Ron eyes turned hard before looking away from her.

Antea's fists clenched.

"You had best not be saying what I think you're saying boyo." Antea hissed. "You look me in the eye and tell me they know."

"They don't know." Ron spoke coldly, detached.

Antea breathed in sharply. Standing up and dusting herself off she motioned for Ron to do the same. He did after a long moment. They didn't say a word all the way back to the hospital or as she signed him back into their care. When Ron finally looked up at her she turned to him.

"You can't live your life around a grave." Antea repeated firmly, looking Ron in the eye. "You think you're any different from me Ron? You're preparing your family for the worst. You wrote out all those long letters saying goodbye. You're distancing yourself from them. You wrote your will. You want to break up with your lass to make it easier. You're doing all these things for *when* you die not *if* . It's you whose living your life around a grave."

Ron couldn't say anything to that.

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*We were okay with the Strategy Training because it could only be done in Australia. This is something that can be done right here while your with us. Stop being such an idiot.*

-Harry

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*I don't understand why you're doing this Ron, but I urge you to think carefully about what you're causing. Please just reconsider... This will tear Harry and Hermione apart. You showed so much regret when you left them last time, yet you're doing it again?*

-Bill

---

"Alright. Open them." Ron's voice commanded.

Rose did as she was told and gasped as she spotted the giant beast several feet ahead of her. Giant black wings ruffled themselves, stretching out from a lithe lion like body, intelligent bright gold eyes peering steadily at her from an eagle head. She shivered in pleasure as the wings unintentionally pushed air around her. The great creature tilted its head curiously at her in such a way that it was difficult not to giggle at how cute he was.

"I need you to do exactly as I tell you alright Rose?" Ron's voice whispered in the darkness.

Rose jerked in surprise, having forgotten the redhead was even there in her amazement of the creature in front of her.

"Yes." She squeaked. "I mean... I will."

Ron's chuckle echoed roughly through the air reminding Rose of the fact that he had vomited dinner up last night. It wasn't a very nice feeling when your throat hurt because of the acid. She'd had to have her mother heal her throat several times because of it. She knew Ron just had a healing a few days ago for the very same thing.

"Hippogriffs are very proud and above all else they appreciate manners and respect. You understand Rose?" Ron asked from beside the large creature. He only continued when she gave him a

sharp nod. "You need to take a few steps forward... slowly! Then bow to him. Stay bowed and wait for him to bow back. If he doesn't then I want you to back away quickly okay?"

She nodded again slowly, but the grin on her face betrayed the feelings of excitement inside of her. Her mother rarely allowed her to go out because she was afraid that Rose would get hurt. Even though she lived in the magical world Rose only ever got to see house elves and goblins. She took a small step forward and another. At the third step she allowed her head to fall forward and curtsied like she saw the princess do in storybooks her mom showed her. Taking a deep breath she waited.

The gold eyes blinked before the head tilted forward in a bow. Holding back a squeal she looked at Ron for the go ahead. Ron smiled at the ten year old and gestured to come closer slowly. The light of Ron's wand flickered unsteadily making Rose pause beside him and peer at him worriedly. His magic was fluctuating again and her mama had told her that it hurt Ron when it did that, but Ron hadn't even flinched.

"His name is Scathac." Ron informed him, ignoring her concerned eyes. "Antea named him. This one is one of her 'babies' from Ireland."

Ron's large shaking hand gently took her small frail one and brushed her fingers along the great beast. The hippogriff crooned like a bird in pleasure. Rose giggled. The feathers were unbelievably soft. Ron's hand guided hers to the fur to stroke. The fur was even softer.

"Do you want to ride him Rose? I'll take you." Ron asked her.

Rose turned to Ron with wide disbelieving eyes. The grin on Ron's face told her that he wasn't lying to her. She felt a grin split her face so wide that it actually kinda hurt.

"No way!" She exclaimed quietly, afraid to upset the hippogriff.

"I already got Antea's permission and everything." Ron told her with a grin of his own.

She lifted her hands up without another word. Rose felt the medical band around Ron's wrist dig into her side as his long arms wrapped around her and lifted her from the ground. She felt them struggle for a second, her feet dropping a few inches, before Ron brought her all the way up and onto the back of the hippogriff. She didn't say a word about how much effort that took him though.

Just like she never said anything about how his hand's constantly trembled and about how much weight he'd lost the last few months. She tried not to think about the time she accidentally walked into the room during one of his treatments and freaked because of his screaming. She tried not to remember the sound of his ragged breaths during the day or how he tossed and turned every night in his bed at the hospital.

She said nothing because she knew. She'd been sick for a long time and knew all about how horrible it was to not be able to perform the simplest of tasks. She knew about pain and vomiting and nightmares and how people looked at her when she walked through the streets. She was thinner than was naturally and easily bruised so it looked like her mama hurt her. She often had dark and yellow circles under her eyes and her breath often had a nasty wheezing sound to it.

Rose felt Ron get onto the back of the hippogriff behind her. Arms moved around her to grip the hippogriff and secure her.

"Are you ready?" He asked her, his own voice laced with excitement.

The feeling of people looking at you and just *waiting* for you to die was scary. Ron understood that. They looked at him the same way. Customers at the café had turned Ron away as a waiter before because of how he looked. They thought that he was going to infect their food. Rose remembered the anger and embarrassment on Ron's face and understood.



"Definitely." Rose answered back confidently.

"Do you mind taking us up Scathac?" Ron asked politely, making the signal Antea taught him.

A single gold eye looked back at them before taking off into the air.

Rose screamed in surprise and joy.

When he brought over her hot cocoa a little while later she'd held his hand and asked him to stay with her. She'd told him about how the other children at school didn't want to play with her because they thought that they were going to get what she got. They told her that they didn't want to be 'ugly.' And when she broke down crying in the middle of the café he brought her upstairs and let her sob into his chest. He told her that the other children were awful for saying that and that she was a beautiful little girl.

And then he had forced her chin up from his chest and told her that he would be honored if she would let him call her his little sister. He said it was the duty of all big brothers to watch out for their little sisters and that they should make it official instead of pretending otherwise. He had whipped out his wand, put her hand over his, and in a big dramatic voice dubbed her Rose Ruth Weasley Salen.

"Wow!" Rose exclaimed over the wind as earth disappeared beneath them.

The stars still shone brightly even as they began to fade with the lightening of the sky.

They had gotten up super early for this.

Rose Ruth Weasley Salen. Could she have a crush on her brother? She had fervently denied it when her mama teased her about having a crush on Ron, but she couldn't help it. He was so cute and strong and brave. It was wrong to have a crush on a brother though. Rose debated this as she sat on the floor with her head buried deep into

Ron's chest with tears still leaking out of her eyes. Ron just held her close and told her all the benefits of being an official Weasley.

The powerful wings sliced through the air leaving her heart in her throat as the hippogriff dived sharply. Behind her she heard Ron yelp in surprise.

It was absolutely fantastic.

"Good thing I've got noth'in in my system." Ron muttered a few inches above her ear.

She decided it didn't matter. She'd take him as a big brother if she couldn't marry him. No one besides her mama was ever as kind to her or as patient as Ron. When she got angry about being trapped in a hospital bed so much he understood and entertained her. When she threw a tantrum he didn't get mad, but stayed with her and talked to her until she felt better. When she was unbearably lonely because most children didn't want to interact with her then she went to him. No matter what he was doing he stopped in order to eat lunch with her or play a game with her. When she was scared Ron would tell her stories. When she was in pain and her mama wasn't there then he pulled her to his chest and let her squeeze his hand as hard as she wanted even when his hand was badly bruised.

Ron was a patient like her. They were trapped in the hospital all the time together. Not only that... they were the only ones who were so young. Most of the patients that stayed in the hospital were middle aged. Ron was a teenager and she was just a kid. Mama had said that it was very rare for people as young as her and Ron to get so sick, especially in the wizarding world where they were more capable of fixing illnesses.

Scathac drifted out over the ocean just as the sun began to pour over the horizon. This time it wasn't just her breath that was taken away, she heard Ron gasp as well. Colors of all shades seemed to spread out and banish the remaining stars in the sky in one fell swoop.

Scathac looked back at her with a look that Rose swore was saying 'See? I can see this all the time. I pity you humans who have no wings.' Feeling obligated to agree Rose nodded to the creature.

"He just bloody smirked!" Ron exclaimed. "You see that?"

Rose's answer was a howl of laughter.

"I'm telling you he did!"

Nearly five months they had been each other's company in the depressing silence of the hospital walls. Only her mama came to visit them. She wondered how Ron managed it when she and her mama weren't in the hospital. Rose knew that Ron had made a few friends close to the hospital who visited, but Antea and Traux had work and Auror training to go to. It made her sad to think of how much time he must spend alone and in pain.

Since he'd been made a fulltime inpatient he'd been forced to spend even more long hours alone. She had been getting better and required less overnight stays. Pretty soon she wouldn't need to go back at all. He'd even been forced to give up his part time job at the café because it was too much of a strain. Her mama had told Ron that he could come anytime he wanted just to spend time with them. Sometimes her mama would go up to the hospital and escort Ron to the café so he didn't have to spend all day alone.

When they landed Ron gently set her onto the ground with badly shaking arms. Following her to the ground he went straight to sitting on his knees.

Rose knelt beside him worriedly.

"Ron?"

He was holding his chest where she knew they'd done the last few treatments.

"Ron?"

Her voice was scared this time despite trying to hide it.

"Can you... can you go get Antea for me? She's... she's just inside that tent over there." Ron told her between labored breaths.

When they first met Ron explained to her that he only had a forty percent chance of surviving even with the treatment. Rose had nodded, but didn't really understand what that meant. Her mama told her that it meant that Ron wasn't very likely to live another year. She understood then. Ron was sicker than she was.

Yet Ron worked and went to classes. She hadn't understood. When you are sick you're supposed to stay in bed until you're better. That's what her mama told her. So she asked why Ron didn't stay in bed and if he was a bad boy for not listening to the rules. She had gotten a very sad look on her face and stroked Rose's hair for a while before answering.

*"Adults are different than children dear. They still need to stay in bed, but adults have to pay for the bed. Ron needs to work in order to pay for medicine and a place to stay."*

*"But Ron's a teenager. He's not an adult!" Rose replied crossly.*

*"He's eighteen sweetie. He's just a kid, but in the eyes of the law he's responsible for himself."*

She hadn't understood at all. Where was Ron's mamma and daddy? Shouldn't they have been taking care of him? Mamma's didn't stop caring about their children after they grew up right? She crawled into Ron's hospital bed one night while he was sleeping and gently woke him up to ask him these questions. She knew he wouldn't mind, but it did take a while for him to understand what she was saying. When he finally did Ron's eyes got misty and he smiled at her even though it looked painful.

He'd told her that England had suffered from a horrible war and that it had taken a while to make a bad man go away forever. He explained that a lot of people, like him, were hurt by the war. Some people even died. Ron softly told her that one of the people who died was one of his brothers. His family was hurting very badly from the loss. His family was struggling to pull themselves together again and be happy.

Ron hadn't told his family he was sick. He didn't want them to have to deal with him on top of everything else. His family didn't need to watch him die slowly right after they lost one of their own so he hadn't said anything to them about it. He'd told them he was going to study Aurorship in Australia and left them. They thought Ron was a mean person for leaving.

"Antea!" Rose cried as she burst through the tent doors.

The young woman known as Antea jumped with fright, dropping the Thestral hooves onto the ground.

"Antea! Ron's hurting. He told me to get you." Rose announced more loudly than intended.

The woman was out the door before Rose could turn around. The morning light making the dark skinned woman stand out distinctly among the white sandy area.

"It's not that bad." Rose heard Ron yell out breathlessly. "I didn't mean to scare her or you, but I don't think... I can make it back to the tent."

Rose arrived to see Ron leaning heavily against Antea barely holding his head up. They stumbled towards her tent; a magically modified and expanded living space. Once inside Antea set Ron down on her bed where he gratefully slumped against the many pillows piled up,

"What's wrong with him?" Rose asked fearfully.

Ron opened up one eye to peer at her tiredly.

"Nothing. It just took a lot... out of me is all." The redhead murmured. "I'll get you home soon as I rest a bit. I promised... your mum I'd get you there... before breakfast. She just got home from having the baby... wouldn't want her to be worrying."

"Yeah well I'll be doing tha' as soon as ye gets you're medicine boyo." Antea announced.

Ron turned his face into his pillow before bringing his legs under him and sitting up slightly.

"You don't need to do that. I got it." Ron insisted.

"It took you a week and a half o kissing me arse to convince me to let you take the kid on me baby so I say nay Mr. Ronald. You'll stay where I say and no 'if' 'ands' or 'buts' about it." Antea said, winking at her.

Rose giggled. She liked Antea.

"You should listen to your mamma Ron." Rose told him petulantly.

"Wha.. Oi! I just took... your shrimp butt on a hippogriff... Show some appre... ciation!" Ron barked incredulously between breaths.

Rose outright laughed this time. She watched as Antea sat beside him with a gruesome looking potion, holding it to Ron's lips. Ron didn't even grimace. He took it into his severely shaking hands and gulped it down without complaint.

"Th... thanks." Ron told her gratefully.

"I have ta change yer bandages too." Antea told him sternly. "Part of the deal for releasing you temporarily into me custody is that I help you do this stuff."

Ron did grimace this time.

"It can wait till I get in the hospital Antea. It's nasty... and you don't need to be worrying about it. I really... appreciate you willing to help me, but that's... too much." Ron told Antea.

"Why is it too much?" Rose asked curiously.

She had never seen anyone change Ron's bandages before. Her nurse always took her out of the room when they did it in the hospital.

Rose watched as Antea turned to Ron with a glint in her eyes.

"Yes Ron dear, why IS it too much?" Antea asked, falsely cheerful.

Ron shifted uneasily, sending a glare towards Antea, before turning towards her. His breathing was leveling out again.

"Rose... You know how you..." Ron paused, clearly wanting to pick his words carefully. "You bruise very easily because you're sick?"

Rose nodded slowly.

"Well I'm like that... only it's centered around the treatment area and it's not just bruising... it's something that's not very nice to look at. Like... like... when an apple starts to rot and you cut it open." Ron explained.

Rose's nose wrinkled. She still didn't understand. She looked towards Antea, but the woman wouldn't look at her.

"Sorry. I shouldn't o pushed." Antea muttered to Ron before turning to Rose. "Lass... can you be a big gal for me and wait outside for a few minutes?"

Rose nodded. She knew when adults didn't want her to see something. Walking out of the tent Rose heard Antea perform a silencing charm on the tent. Nearly twenty minutes passed before Antea walked out of the tent to smile tiredly at her.

"It didn't hurt him did it?" Rose asked.

"A little." Antea said honestly. "Sometimes blood sticks to the... eh. Foot in mouth Antea, foot in mouth."

Rose felt her lower lip tremble, but bit it gently to stop. Evidently her effort to hide how upset she was hadn't been good enough because Antea pulled her into a strong hug. A hand lay lightly at the back of her head in a soothing manner.

"I know it must be scary ta see this lass. It scares us adults to see it, so ta kids it must be something fierce to face." Antea pulled back, her hands coming up to Rose's face and wiping two tear tracks away with her thumbs. "It's worse when it takes ya by surprise isn't it? It's scary cause Ron acts so tough and then he's suddenly not?"

Rose nodded sharply, her lip losing the battle and spilling out a scared, choked sob. Antea gave Rose another long, tight hug before pulling away.

"Would you like ta see him before I take you home?" Antea asked quietly. "You'll have to be quiet because he's asle..."

Rose was already inside. Ron was passed out on Antea's bed. Not only was Ron's large hoodie gone, but also his shirt was off with the bandages covering the entirety of his torso. Rose flinched at the sight of how thin Ron was. She could clearly see his hipbones where the sweat pants began and Ron's too thin arms seemed scarier without the thick cloth to cushion everything. And the skin directly under the white bandages on his torso was heavily bruised. She knew from experience how sensitive an area like that could be.

Walking up to the bed Rose sat beside it. The reality that she really could lose him crashing down hard as she listened to the wheezing breath from the teenager she'd come to see as a big brother. No... not even that. She'd moved passed having a crush on him a while ago and never once thought of him as a big brother. He had become her daddy.



He did everything that she imagined a daddy would do. She still remembered his warmth as he carried her to bed each night when he worked at the café. She remembered him returning her stuffed frog to her when he thought she was asleep and tucking her in. He held her when she cried and told her stories and was there for her no matter what. He danced with her to the radio late at night in the hospital the night before she needed to have a piece of lung repaired. He told her how great a big sister she was going to be.

Rose put her head in her lap and cried softly. She couldn't lose her daddy. She wanted Ron to be her daddy. It didn't matter if her mamma didn't love him like that. They didn't have to get married. Ron could just come live with them. Rose wiped her eyes and grabbed Ron's still trembling hand in hers. Leaning forward Rose placed a kiss on his cheek under the dark circles she knew meant he never slept well.

Standing up and letting go of his hand Rose turned and ran to Antea. Throwing her arms around the surprised woman's waist she stole one last hug from her before nodding. Glancing back at Ron just one more time and silently begging whatever higher power her mamma called on daily that they would not let him die.

---

*I'm staying here Harry. Hermione can look for someone else if she wants. I'm not gonna date anyone, but I'm not gonna make her wait. Tell her that. -Ron*

---

*What are you doing Ron? I'm not telling her that! After everything that's happened between you two... you're breaking up with her now? Ron what the hell... shit... she's found the letter mate.*

*-Harry*

---

*You giant, insufferable git! You are by far the biggest idiot I've ever met! I am not and will not be seeing anyone else. If you honestly*

*think I'm incapable of waiting when it took you so many years to man up and kiss me you have another thing coming! You idiot! And... **AND...** ! It is so much easier to be angry with you when I can just yell! You... just... I'm sending you a howler!*

*-Hermione*

---

Ron grit his teeth. Just one more week. Seven more days and then his chest would be healed enough for it to be safe to perform treatment on his back. He just needed to endure the pain for seven more days. Ron breathed out deeply. Pulling the covers further around himself in an attempt to bring heat to his body. Then it came. Ron for the first time dreaded hearing the familiar sound of pattering feet entering his room.

"Ron?" Rose's soft voice asked.

Ron clenched his teeth harder against the pain, but didn't say anything. If he opened his mouth he'd start crying and he couldn't cry in front of Rose. A small body crawled into the bed with him and Ron begged her to go away. She couldn't see this. It wasn't right.

"Ron can I sleep with you tonight? I had a nightmare." Rose whispered tearfully.

Ron's jaw trembled with the effort to keep his mouth shut. His entire body was trembling, but like his hands Rose would never say anything about it. She just accepted it. Small hands touched his face, startling him.

"Ron... why are you crying?" Rose asked frantically.

He was crying? Opening his eyes Ron stared into brown irises that were mere inches away from him. Ron let out a choked gasp and shook his head at the little girl in front of him.

"Rose, I need you to go back to your own room okay?" Ron asked in a tight voice.

"You're hurting." Rose stated, her small hands grasping his own held tightly against his chest.

"Yeah." Ron choked out.

"And you're so cold." Rose murmured.

"That too." Ron gasped out as another wave of pain took him.

Little arms wrapped around his neck and a head snuggled against his still healing chest.

"I can be your Froggy tonight." Rose whispered. "When I hurt I hold Mr. Frog against me and he keeps me warm and makes me feel better.... And I make his nightmares go away for him." She added softly.

Ron choked on a sob. When he unclenched his arms from his chest it was like he hadn't moved his muscles in years. Gently wrapping her in a hug Ron kissed her forehead the way his mother did when he was little. He felt hot tears rolling down his cheeks and did his best not to whimper when his back burst in a rapid succession of pain. Resting his head against the top of hers he closed his eyes and willed his body to fall into unconsciousness. The small body against him snuggled further into his thick hoodie, hands clenched around the cloth.

He knew that pretty soon a nurse would be frantically running around the hospital ward looking for Rose with a fast asleep baby in her arms.

He knew that he should send her back to bed.

He knew that he should be strong and stop crying in front of this little girl.

He didn't have the energy to yell for a nurse walking by his open door.

He couldn't bring himself to send her back either.

And if he could stop the tears or the cries of pain periodically escaping him then they would never have fallen in the first place.

So he laid there willing himself to sleep while holding the small fragile bundle in his arms and riding out wave after wave of throbbing pain. Ron stared out across his room long after Rose's breaths evened out in sleep, the tiny beating heart loud and warm against his slow, freezing body. When the strongest surge racked his body Ron buried his face in Rose's hair and hugged her against him. A loud sob broke out of his throat, but Rose slept on.

It was not in fact the nurse that found Rose, but her very panicked mother.

"She had a nightmare." Ron explained, damning himself for the crack in his voice.

Mary stared at him for a long moment, hand over her mouth, before she nodded. Rather than reach to pick up Rose from his arms she sat down in the chair beside his bed and began to stroke his own hair. It was surprisingly comforting. At some point she left and came back with a thick blanket, tucking them both in, but Ron had already drifted off to sleep.

---

*Dear Ronald*

*Ronald, I know I'm not someone who can really tell you what to do, kettle calling the pot black and all that, but I believe that you are making a grave mistake. Speaking from experience I think you need to step back and consider if this decision is worth giving up your family. Not to say that anyone will disown you... you can come back at any point. That is to say that we wouldn't turn our backs on you,*

*you know that. I just think that you should come home. Remember how angry you were at me for not coming home? For upsetting mum and dad? That's what you're doing now Ronnie. Mum cried when she heard that you didn't plan on returning any time soon. Please don't make the same mistake I did.*

*Sincerely*

*Yours Truly*

*Your Brother*

*With Love*

*Percy Weasley*

---

*Pot calling the kettle black? So now I'm a traitor who ignores fathers after they nearly die and uses his little brother's ties to a celebrity to get on the ministers good side huh? You know nothing so don't act like you do. You were gone all throughout the war and you think just because you showed up at the last possible second that you suddenly **know**? Don't write again. -Ron*

---

Rose knew something was wrong about forty five seconds before the screaming began. Ron, who'd been listening to her complain about the homework they gave her to do, suddenly dropped the steaming mug of tea into his lap with a look of shock on his face. The herbal drink spilled over the thick blanket before trickling over the side of the bed to splash onto the floor. Ron gripped the bars on the side of the bed with such force that it looked painful. In the final ten seconds he looked directly into her eyes, lips moving as if he were trying to say something, and his entire body trembling as if it were trying to shake itself apart.

At the same moment she made it to the door to yell for help the magical strings of light monitoring Ron all turned bright red. The

sound of an alarm going off was overpowered by sudden agonized screams tearing through the hallways. Even as she turned to see Ron withering in agony on the bed several healers were pushing passed her towards into the room.

"Ron." Rose whispered in horror.

His body was being forced down by two of the healers while a third used a spell to remove all the layers of clothes Ron had taken to wearing in order to keep warm. Rose rushed to the bed wanting to hold his hand and tell him she was there.

"Daddy." Rose called out desperately.

The clothes were off revealing dark, vein like trails spreading across his back. Another scream echoed through the air drowning her out. One of the healers accidentally bumped into her. Glancing down the woman scowled.

"Somebody get this kid out of the way!" She yelled out into the halls.

Ron's back arched and his mouth opened wide, but nothing came out. A silent scream. Tears were across his tears and sliding down his forehead as he convulsed in pain.

"Daddy!" Rose shouted in terror.

Arms wrapped around her and pulled her away from the hospital room. She screamed and fought calling out, telling them that she couldn't leave him, begging them not to let her leave her daddy alone. When her mama came bustling into the room and swept her into her arms Rose wept into her chest.

"That's not your daddy sweetie... that's Ron remember." Mary whispered.

Rose shook her head, snot and tears sliding down her face, before she looked up into her mama's brimming eyes.

She had snuck out of her room again to tell Ron about her day.

Ron listened like he always did.

Rose tried explaining this to her mamma as she was rocked back and forth in her own hospital bed. She told her about all the things that Ron did all the time. The things her mamma didn't see Ron do like tucking her in and showing her magic tricks even though he wasn't supposed to. She told her about all the times Ron told her stories and taught her things about the magical world. She talked about how Ron and her celebrated Halloween, about being taken up on a Hippogriff, the short trip to the bakery down the street where Ron and her shared a pastry. Rose wasn't even sure if half the things were recognizable as words because she started hiccupping and stuttering. Still... she tried to tell her mamma that Ron was her daddy because he did all the things that people said daddy's do.

When she was finished speaking though, her mamma looked at her like she was about to cry. Eventually Rose had to ask... she had to know.

"Is da..." She paused feeling her mama's body tense. "Is Ron going to be okay?"

"Sweetie... I don't know. I hope so, but I don't know." Mary Salen answered in a shaky voice.

"Can he be part of our family mama?" Rose asked, even quieter.

"It doesn't work like that sweetie. Ron can be your friend... he can even be like your big brother, but he can't be your daddy. He's a teenager Rosey. He's just like you... he's very sick and very frightened and it's not okay to put that kind of... it takes a lot of work to be a daddy and you can't ask him to do that when he's so sick sweetie." Mary tried to explain.

"He already does all the things a daddy does though..." Rose insisted, she became irritated when she noticed that the wheezing

quality had returned to her throat again.

"Oh sweetie... I'm not explaining this right. It's like... if your baby brother started to call you mamma because you do nice things for him, big sister things." Mary explained wearily.

Rose frowned up at her mama.

"I don't care what he is... I just want him to be okay." Rose mumbled.

---

"The Minister of Magic from England personally offered me a job in interrogation. He said you spoke highly of me..." Traux murmured. "Said you were a high ranking individual who he highly respected. My barely eighteen year old Auror trainee mate from England is some badass member of the Aurors highest branch in his country and I didn't even know."

A hollow laugh echoed through the room.

"You gotta wake up so I can thank you mate. You can't go around speaking to Ministers about me and getting me high ranking jobs without letting me thank you. It's just not polite." Traux told the figure on the bed.

The redhead turned his head and mumbled, but didn't wake. Sweat dripped down his pale face.

"You're not going to be happy when you wake up smelling like you haven't showered in weeks." Traux warned him. "Being feverish and sickly doesn't mean you have an excuse to miss our Friday poker night either. Me and Antea will just split your Oreos between us I swear!"

Traux jumped as the light over Ron's mouth flashed red again as his breath hitched.



"If you don't wake up so I can thank you I'll kiss the job goodbye you know? It's not right to accept it if you don't thank the person who got you the job. My mother would never let me hear the end of it."

Traux rubbed his face before glancing at the clock. He'd have to leave for class soon.

"They want me to spend my whole winter break in England doing work. They're offering about three times as much than I would get anywhere around here. They're desperate. Minister Shacklebolt told me you two lost some friends who were their best interrogators... you never told me that. Then again you don't talk about the war at all."

A nurse passed by the open door.

"They told me, the staff I mean not the Minister, they told me that this was bad. You didn't recover enough of your own magic before they had to perform emergency extraction treatment on your back. They said we almost lost you. You've been out three days straight mate."

At ten minutes to seven Traux finally admitted that if he didn't leave now he'd be late.

"You'd best be up when I see you tomorrow morning."

---

*You are the world's biggest git. I absolutely can't believe you. Whatever you're hiding is not worth this ya giant wanker! You tell me what's going on or so help me I'll come down there and drag you back myself! I know that story about a disaster was total bullshit! This shit that your pulling has got to stop and I will stop it here and now!*

*-George*

---

*Fred's not there to occupy your time so you're bothering me? Get a life George! -Ron*

---

*Fuck you. - George*

---

"Morning sunshine!" A woman's voice sang.

"Go away." Ron mumbled grouchily. He was beyond exhausted, everything hurt, and if he moved an inch he was hit with a bout of nausea that was far too strong for someone who didn't have anything in his stomach.

"You had better sit up or I'll feckin' make you." Antea snapped, plopping down on the end of his bed.

Ron cracked an eye open to glare at the thing in his bed.

"I've got all sorts o treats from the café and you're going to eat a least one of them." Antea announced.

Antea ripped his blanket from him causing Ron to curl into himself for warmth.

"You've been awake for four days and haven't eatin' a feckin' thing. A nurse is comin' in to take that damn tube out so you can eat proper." Antea went on, ignoring the moan coming from him.

"I don't want to. Please... I'll eat later." Ron begged in his raspy voice.

"I'll get Rose in here and you know she'll tear up if she sees you like this... no feckin' meat at all now. Get up or I'll do it!" Antea threatened.

"That's so wrong." Ron rasped.

"She'll be crying and askin' ya 'why Ron why? Don't leave me alone!' she'll say." Antea went on.

"Alriiiiight." Ron whined as he forced himself to sit up. "Merlin that's just sick."

His entire body felt like lead weight. A dizzy spell hit him forcing Ron to use the backboard of the bed as support. Blinking rapidly three Antea's became a single fuzzy one.

"If you're strong enough to write your letters then you can eat too."

"I'm just gonna vo..." Ron's voice faded into nothing.

Antea looked up to see Ron fast asleep against the backboard with his knees up to his chest and arms under his head.

---

*Thanks Harry. I love having my letters passed around to the whole family. I really appreciate it. Since this is apparently going to be seen by everyone I want you all to know that I really don't care what you have to say. I'm staying. -Ron*

---

*Son you've made quite a mess of things here. Everyone is very upset. Do you want to tell me why you've been purposefully angering your family and closest friends? I had to drag George raving drunk out of a bar last night and all I could get out of him was that he wanted to hit you the next time he saw you. I never thought you of this kind of behavior my boy. Your mother is absolutely devastated by the things you've been saying. Harry and Hermione are at their wits end. Bill is very disappointed in you young man. They all deserve an apology from you Ronald.*

*Dad*

---

*I'm not the one whose blowing this up dad. It isn't that big of a deal. They'll be fine without me. It will be okay. You all aren't going to fall apart without me. -Ron*

---

"It doesn't make any sense at all." Harry growled irritably.

"Barty Crouch Jr. took Moody's place for a year without anyone being the wiser Harry." Kingsley reminded him softly.

"But why pretend to be someone who everyone knows is dead. It doesn't make any sense." Harry spat.

"The Auror department knows, the Malfoy's know, Death Eaters know... but what about the general public? Most of *them* are not even aware that the man was still alive the *first* time around." Kingsley reminded him.

"Out of all the people in the world why Wormtail though? Why would anyone want to take Wormtails place?" Harry yelled in exasperation.

"Unfortunately that's what part of the Aurors job is about, finding that sort of stuff out." Kingsley stated knowingly.

"But why can't we simply take their memories and look into them? No one would ever be wrongly accused. No one would ever be falsely put into jail because we would know!" Harry said with a sigh. "Going around and interrogating all of these Death Eaters for hours is like being mind fucked. Their all twisted... and trying to get them to admit to anything is like getting Hagrid to choose fluffy bunnies over dragons."

"A memory has to be willingly given Harry. It's simply not possible to force a memory out of someone. Besides that, we would descend to the level of the criminals themselves by ripping memories out of people."

"But these Death Eaters know how to evade Veritaserum! Every last one of them is filled with some many evading half-truths that nothing we get from them is definite or useful." Harry groaned.

"The same problem happened last time Harry. This time there is a great difference though... Last time the Ministry wanted to be done with everything as quickly as possible. They made grave mistakes. I have made sure that we will go through every single individual. Every person who is willing to give up memories in their trial to prove imperius has been set free. It says a great deal of those still held doesn't it?" Kingsley mumbled the last part softly.

"They never gave Sirius that chance." Harry stated bitterly.

"How things could have been different if they had." Kingsley stated tiredly. "So many people could have been spared. Hagrid never would have been sent to Azkaban either if they had simply asked him to testify with the pensive."

"Why couldn't they have? I would gladly have given them my memory of Voldemorts return or the attack of the dementors if they'd asked." Harry stated quietly.

"When people are raised a certain way they do not like to question that way! Tradition in the magical world is so steeped into the bones of wizards that the thought of change is simply unimaginable. That's what made the Weasleys so detested by others for such a long time. Their love of muggles, the willingness to change with the world, their lack of care concerning pure bloods or wealth... simply unheard of." Kingsley explained. "The pensive was only invented a few years before you were born Harry. Wizards live much longer than muggles and thus they are more unwilling to adapt to change. In wizarding terms a pensive is on the same level as the computer thing that has come out in the muggle world. It's brand new and the older generation simply didn't want to use it."

"That makes no sense." Harry muttered.

"Indeed it doesn't. Tradition rarely makes any sense to anyone other than the person who first invented it."

"So what are we supposed to do? Keep interrogating Death Eaters in case one of them knows something about the imposter when we know they aren't going to talk." Harry demanded.

"I heard that the program Ron was involved in has a trainee whose specializing in interrogation." Kingsley said thoughtfully, not noticing Harry's body tensing at the name. "I was thinking of bringing him out here to practice on our prisoners over the winter break. He's been highly recommended by both the program and Ronald."

"You've talked to Ron?" Harry demanded. "In person?"

Kingsley jerked guiltily.

"You have!" Harry accused angrily.

"Ron and I have been in communication yes." Kingsley admitted slowly. "I was scoping out possible Aurors for the department since we've lost so many people in the war. Ron told me about several people whom he believed capable of joining our ranks."

"So he's acting as your little scout? Have you been asking him to do other things for you?" Harry snapped.

"I understand that you're angry with Ron right now Harry, but that is no reason to be angry with me for having contact with him." Kingsley spoke sharply.

"I'm angry that he'll see you, but wants nothing to do with me!" Harry screamed. "I'm angry that he's being such a prat to his entire family, but he seems to be perfectly honky dory with you!"

Kingsley's features softened.

"Harry..."

"Why can you go see him, but I can't?" Harry demanded, banging his fists on the table.

Harry looked up at the man pleadingly. He needed to know what was going on with his best friend. Kingsley sighed heavily.

"He didn't want anything to do with me." Kingsley spoke honestly. "We had quite the argument, but there was some things I needed to know that only Ron knows about. It took quite a while and some blackmailing just to get him to talk to me."

Harry deflated instantly.

"How... how was he? I mean how was he doing?" Harry asked quietly.

"He looks like he hasn't slept in a year." Kingsley admitted, not willing to outright lie. "And not to sound like Molly but he could use some meat on his bones. He's made some good friends though."

Harry stared down at the table in silence. Kingsley leaned forward across the table and his voice lowered to a whisper.

"He keeps his deluminator and a picture of the three of you under his pillow. I caught him asleep with both in his hands once. You two are always on his mind. Always." Kingsley stated firmly.

Harry gave Kingsley a small grateful smile.

---

*Ron... whatever you did just... fix it, okay? You're brother's a mess. He's gone out drinking three nights in a row. Percy's been helping him get home and I take care of him in the morning, but I think you should suck it up and say sorry.*

*-Lee Jordan*

---

*What do you expect Ron? You just up and out of the blue declared you're staying in another country to study at a hospital when there's a perfectly good one here to study at. I assumed you were telling everyone and wanted to talk to Hermione and George about it to try and convince you otherwise when I find out you haven't said anything to them! It's not my fault it spread like wildflower! Stop blaming it all on me.*

*-Harry*

---

At the end of the second week since Ron went into emergency treatment Kingsley couldn't help but cringe as he entered the room. He wasn't a squeamish person in any way, but there was something about the sound of another person being sick that made his own stomach roll. It was a fact that Tonks had often teased him about mercilessly whenever they walked into a hospital or the Auror trainee examination room. He straightened his shoulders and walked into Ron's room to take a seat beside the teenager puking his guts out into a bucket in front of him. When he was finished Ron pushed the bucket onto the table before tiredly pulling his knees up and laying his head on them. Turning his body Kingsley's way Ron gave him a rueful smile.

"Haven't puked in two days and you show up now." Ron rasped with a tiny shake of his head in exasperation of the man.

"What can I say?" Kingsley shrugged. "Great timing comes with years of practice."

Leaning back heavily into the many pillows Mary had seen fit to drag into his room Ron winced as his eyes looked directly into the light above.

"How is everyone?" Ron rasped, dragging his fingers roughly over his face.



"They are rather upset and angry about certain letters coming from a certain someone. Apparently you haven't been very nice to them." Kingsley stated, giving the young man a disapproving look.

"I honestly didn't think they'd be this dramatic about me being away. I mean I knew that Harry and Hermione would be upset, but I didn't expect everyone to be jumping down my throat." Ron moaned out.

"My dear boy I'm afraid that you've missed out on the little known fact that all Weasleys possess a small temper problem. I'll make sure that you get the memo next time. We can't be having you being so misinformed." Kingsley stated teasingly, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Oh you're absolutely brilliant. Why didn't I think of that." Ron said dryly, but there was a lopsided smile on his face giving him away.

"It's that experience again." Kingsley stated knowingly.

Ron laughed but it turned into a grimace as another wave of nausea hit. He buried his face in his pillow, taking deep breaths, willing the feeling to go away.

"Medicine still affecting you badly then." Kingsley asked sympathetically.

"I didn't even bother to ask them what it is there giving me this time." Ron finally muttered when he had his stomach under control.

"Excuse me sir." A nurse sounded stiffly from the doorway. "Visiting hours for all, but family are over for today. You're more than welcome to come back in the morning."

"I don't think Pam likes you." Ron whispered with a chuckle.

"Hestia put both of us on her hate list I'm afraid." Kingsley whispered back as he stood up.

Ron's eyes shined with curiosity at that statement.

"Apparently she doesn't like Aurors because they have the ability to get private information."

"Knew I liked that woman." Ron rasped with a cheeky grin.

---

*I told mum and dad so they wouldn't freak out about seeing my hand on the clock pointing at hospital so much, but it wasn't anyone else's business! Hermione's of course, but why would you tell George! - Ron*

---

*I know this is hard to believe Ronald, but Harry and I have both stayed in contact with your family after you left. **We** wanted to be there for them.*

*-Hermione*

---

Trying to walk after three weeks of being bed ridden was much like having a charm placed on you that turned your bones to rubber. His legs wouldn't cooperate with him, instead choosing to turn in strange and random directions when the tiniest bit of weight was applied. He'd even tried performing a very small strengthening charm, but it just succeeded in making them feel unpleasantly tingly.

His rehabilitation to learn how to walk again didn't technically start till tomorrow, but he'd been suffering the horrifying humiliation of being 'taken' to the bathroom for three weeks and if he had the ability to *crawl* he would not endure it again. So sliding down to the ground as carefully as possible he prayed none of the nurses would be alerted to his movements because being found crawling on the ground was not very far below his list to someone helping him take a piss. The magical strands wrapped around him were designed to move with him so even while he moved across the floor they still swirled around him. It was three o'clock in the morning and he'd been woken up twice by nightmares, three times by people waltzing into his room to 'check' on him, and once by the damned tag on his wrist getting

caught between the metal of the bed railings. Chances were he wouldn't be sleeping for the rest of the night.

Ron was glad for the thick socks and warm sweat pants because the tiles were icy cold to his hands. Dragging himself across the floor as quietly as he could Ron made it to the small bathroom attached to his room. Roughly closing the door shut he did his business as quickly as humanly possible while stilling every time the sound of someone walking down the halls echoed. All those involved to his case seemed determined to force him to be as dependent on them as possible. They heavily frowned down upon a patient who wanted to keep something so unheard of as 'privacy' and 'pride' in tacked.

Laying his wand down beside the small tub given to long term patients Ron wished he could perform a silencing charm for the room. The unfortunate truth was that he simply wasn't strong enough anymore to chance something like that. Turning on the facet Ron made sure not to make the water too warm. The pain potion that chilled him caused his body to go into shock if he took hot baths. He learned that the hard way after the dosage was raised. Stripping, Ron settled down into the water with great pleasure, both for the privacy and the feeling of washing the cold sweat off his body.

He dragged the cloth slowly over his front, enjoying the feel and allowing himself to relax a little bit. He never felt relaxed in the hospital. It was one giant stressor. There were people walking around all the time while he tried to sleep, coming in and out of the room, causing him to jerk awake constantly. Armed individuals while his magic barely worked. This was one of the main reasons he didn't want to live in the hospital. It was... frightening. He'd spent so long on the run from death eaters on high alert that he didn't know how to turn it off. Every tiny movement woke him up and no matter how many times he told himself that no one was after him he still laid alert for hours before falling back to sleep.

He wondered how Harry and Hermione were doing. All they'd been doing this past month was arguing back and forth. They hadn't told him how they were and he hadn't said anything to them. It left a giant

hole inside of him, like a part of him had been hallowed out without any warning. He made the resolution to tell them everything going into the ritual operation, but waking to Kingsley had scared him more than he ever imagined.

He was suddenly aware of how disgusting he looked being so thin and sickly. He was suddenly hit by every little thing he needed help with and all the things he wouldn't be able to do in the future. The gap between how far Harry and Hermione were in their Auror training and how behind he was suddenly seemed impossibly big. The thought of forcing them to help him became unbearably clear and seemed so cruel. It didn't feel like he would be telling the truth. It felt like he would be whining like an attention seeking child.

'Woe is me! I'm sick so drop whatever you're doing and come help me!'

And it would be forcing them. He knew Harry and Hermione better than they did most of the time. They'd feel obligated to help him. They had this hero complex that made them think that every problem in the world was their personal problem. They would drop out of Auror training if it meant being there for him. They wouldn't understand that he didn't need their help. They wouldn't understand that he didn't want them to give up their dreams or put them on hold for him. All he needed was to be able to see them. All he wanted was to spend time with them. They were both too bloody caring for their own good though. They *wouldn't* simply leave it at that.

It wasn't just him suffering the nightmares, he knew, Harry's were even worse. They were dealing with the paranoia of post-traumatic stress disorder the same as him, but they were in England where there were still Death Eaters roaming free. They were in the middle of the propaganda and all the expectations that came with being war heroes. He'd read their letters about people dogging them and the letters from the whole family telling him about things Harry and Hermione wouldn't have wanted him to know.

So when the time came to tell the truth to his family, when Kingsley sat before him, he couldn't do it. He couldn't tell them what was happening or fix the things he wanted to fix. The moment he stepped over that line and told them all, there wouldn't be a way to take his words back, they would be out in the open.

What would happen if he told them?

He honestly wasn't sure. He was in Australia after all. Traveling to Australia by international port key was rather expensive. It wasn't something a normal person could do more than once every several months. There was a reason why his mum and dad only saw Charlie once every other year when he lived in Romania. There was a reason why no one had been able to visit him yet and why it took so much planning on Harry and Hermion's part when they set up the plans to see him. It was one of the reason's they'd been so angry and insistent with him.

Traveling such distances, even in the wizarding world, took time to book and more money than the average person. If any wizard could simply move from one part of the earth to the other then a hell of a lot more wizarding families would have left the moment the second war started. So what would Harry and Hermione do? He knew it would be drastic. He knew it would be dramatic and uncalled for. That was just how they were.

Ron sunk under the water, keeping his nose above to breathe, and just laid there for a while. The water was starting to get unpleasantly cold due to his own body chilling it. Merlin what he would give just to feel warm again. He almost wanted to experience the pain of living without the potion for a little bit just so he could feel some kind of heat inside of him. At this point though... Dr. Blake informed him that his body was in too bad a shape to stop taking the pain potion. It would be exactly like the time he'd fallen unconscious for two days and hadn't been able to take it. He'd woken up in agony, not able to move at all.

The sound of the bathroom door opening startled Ron into sitting up. A male healer was in the doorway staring down at him with a frown. Ron scowled at him, his ears turning bright red as he attempted to cover his private parts, but didn't bother saying anything. Convincing the man to allow him to get dressed without him there was about as worth wild as convincing Hermione that books weren't useful. Generally speaking they allowed him to take baths alone and get dressed, but since the emergency treatment he'd been on strict watch.

"If you wanted to take a bath you should have alerted someone Mr. Weasley." The healer informed him kindly.

Stupid healers.

Ron finished wrapping the towel around his waist while he searched for his clothes and ignored the man. The staff was very much aware of how much he *hated* being watched while he dressed. It was degrading and creepy. They could spout out however much mumbo jumbo they wanted about the dangers that came with him 'exerting' himself too much. It was still wrong.

Finding a clean hoodie and hospital attire Ron pulled them on while expertly avoiding exposing any of his parts for anyone to see. He'd been at this for three weeks after all. Well... to be fair he'd been unconscious for the first week. Two weeks was still quite a few attempts though. Gingerly putting his feet on the ground Ron tested if he'd be able to walk by himself even though he knew it was useless. It made him feel better to at least try before allowing someone to help him to the bed.

The male healer, he couldn't for the life of him remember the man's name, simply gave him an amused smirk. Ron scowled at him as his legs shook dangerously. Refusing to look at the man Ron held out one of his hands. The healer brought Ron's arm carefully over his shoulder and placed his other hand around Ron's waist pulling him up all the way. Ron was eight inches taller than the man, but was easily lifted and carried the short distance to the bed. Ron alternated

between glaring at his feet, which were more sliding than walking for him, and sending the healer an irritated look. The man just smiled.

Stupid healers.

All those designated to his case not only *knew* he didn't like this kind of stuff, but thought it was *hilarious*. He'd heard them talking and snickering about him before. Even Pam, that traitor, had laughed at a few of their stories. Never would he suffer more of a humiliation than the time he'd been perved on by one of the older female nurses. Apparently he had a fine ass.

The healer set him down in the bed, but backed off of helping Ron put the covers over him when the red head gave him a dirty look. He would not allow a grown man to *tuck him in*. Ron ripped the blanket up and around him. Sending one last glare at the man before turning his back on him to lay down Ron sighed at the sound of retreating footsteps.

"Thanks." Ron grouched out, voice still clearly annoyed.

The healer chuckled.

"You're welcome Mr. Weasley."

Stupid healers.

---

*Stop showing Hermione letters I write to you Harry. Godric I might as well be addressing your letters to the whole bloody family. -Ron*

---

Rose shouldn't have been out of bed. She shouldn't be walking and really shouldn't be away from her mother. She hadn't seen Ron in days though, not since her mother brought her to see him, but he'd been asleep. She told her mamma that it was easy to wake Ron up and that it just took him a few minutes to understand you afterwards. Her mother hadn't been happy at all to hear that though. She'd been

rather angry to find out that she woke Ron up a lot. She tried explaining to her mama that Ron didn't mind, but she wouldn't hear it. So Rose had to sneak out while her mama had gone to pick up the baby from his daycare center.

She'd woken that morning with a deep wheezing breath that scared her mother. It felt as if she had stuff sloshing around in her lungs. The mediwitch that examined her hadn't been happy at all and her and her mama had talked in hushed voices for a long time. That was something else she really hated. The fact that they wouldn't tell her what was going on. She was the one who was sick. She'd been sick since forever and she could deal with whatever it was that they had to say. They expected her to do what they wanted without telling her why she had to do it. It was annoying and it really hurt her feelings. She wasn't a thing that they could just push around whenever they wanted.

A nurse turned the corner. Rose ducked under a nearby medical trolley squeezing Mr. Frog tightly to her. Looking at it she smiled. Ron told her once that it wasn't right that they called it a trolley. Trolleys were supposed to carry goodies like candy and snacks. She remembered him imitating her nurse's voice, saying 'And here's your one hundredth potion for your digestive system. It may look like someone vomited in it, but let me assure you! It tastes marvelous.' She even remembered the one he was talking about. It didn't taste 'marvelous' at all. The taste was vile and so powerful it made you want to vomit. The only thing that kept it down was the knowledge that if they threw it up they'd just have to take another dose.

Rose entered Ron's room to find him carefully writing a letter on the bed. She placed Mr. Frog on the bed first before pulling herself up. The eighteen year old looked up at the sound and frowned.

"Rose you shouldn't have walked here. I would have come if you told your nurse you wanted to see me." He told her quietly.

She smiled through her wheezing and shook her head.



"I like... your room better." She told him.

"Then you should have asked to come here. Don't make excuses." Ron said sternly, but he patted the spot beside him anyways, moving so that she could sit beside him.

"Who... are you... writing?" Rose asked breathlessly.

"George, one of my brothers, I said some hurtful words and now I have to apologize." Ron explained.

"Why'd you say them?" Rose asked curiously, she'd seen Ron argue with Traux and Antea, but he never said anything mean.

"I was scared he was going to come down here. That's no excuse, but when you let your emotions rule you, you do stupid things. That's why I'm apologizing. It doesn't erase what I said, but I hope it will make it a little better for him." Ron told her gently.

"Do you think that me and my brother will get along?" Rose asked.

"Sometimes, but other times you probably won't like each other much. They'll always be there for you though, even when their being pigheaded. Siblings are sort of like... lifelong partners. You've got this contract with them, but instead of marriage where you promise to always be there and love each other romantically, you have one that says that no matter what they do or say they always have the right to be forgiven and loved. They always have you whether you like each other or not." Ron tried to explain.

"So we might... not like each other?" Rose asked, confused.

"Uh... well... I'm sure Ryan will love you. You each have your own personality though don't you? So I can't say for certain how well you'll get along, just that you'll love each other." Ron tried again.

"That makes... sense." Rose said with a nod.

Rose watched Ron finish writing his letter before tugging on his thick hoodie.

"Can you tell me a story? One about your big brother George?" Rose asked.

Ron thought for a long minute before nodding.

"Yeah... There was this time that all of us were playing hide and go seek..."

Rose leaned against Ron's shoulder as he told her about his big brother. His stories were always exciting. She loved listening to her da... to Ron talk.

---

*George, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have dragged Fred into this. It was wrong. Drinking isn't gonna bring him back and you're just gonna feel awful when the buzz is off. I'm sorry and I know that saying sorry really isn't going to make it up to you. Everybody is probably telling you that Fred wouldn't want this, but... honestly I think we don't understand what the fuck Fred would want in this situation. Only you do. You know what Fred would want you to do. We each would want different things from the people we leave behind I think. If I died tomorrow... I would want you all to just forget me. Fred and you though... You'd want people to remember the good times you had with us right George? Fred always struck me as someone who'd want us to remember his cleverest tricks whether they were good or bad. He always got a kick out of that. You and him would want different things though right? You're different people. My point is that even though you know what Fred would want you to do doesn't mean you have to do it. You have to do what you think will best help you. Don't think about what Fred would want. Everybody wants you to be all better immediately, but that's not gonna happen. Their all just a bunch of optimistic buggers is what it is. It's probably not gonna be alright for a long time. It's probably gonna be really hard and you're going to want to give up because it's easier. It really would be easier, but none of us would have gotten anything in life if*

*we took the easy way out, right George? The wars over and we're still fighting and it doesn't seem fair. It isn't fair. But one day we'll all make it and be all recovered and stuff and be able to... we'll be okay.*  
-Ron

---

*You're still a giant git.* -George

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*Thanks Ron. George's still is having a few drinks, but he's not been drinking himself into a stupor. I don't know what you said but... Thanks.*

-Lee Jordan

---

The new prison designed for the detainment of prisoners after the disbandment of the dementors and partial destruction of Azkaban sat beneath a lake in Scotland. All besides the Minister of Magic himself, the Auror department, and the Order of the Phoenix were completely in the dark to its existence. There were rumors of course, there were always rumors, but its location was completely unknown.

Harry Potter walked the halls with an air of familiarity learned from weeks spent coming in and out with captured Death Eaters. An intimidating roar was heard throughout the building denoted to the dragons nest sitting just by the lake. Charlie Weasley was officially its new permanent caretaker. The design of the prison itself had been something Moody created during Harry's sixth year at Hogwarts; a precaution due to the suspicions that the dementors were on Voldemort's side.

The Wormtail imposter causing so much trouble for the Ministry had escaped another ambush. The man was hunting other Death Eater escapees and searching for information. What that information was and why he was taking the form of a dead Death Eater was still unknown. There was a Death Eater recently brought in though who'd

been seen with the real Wormtail several times during Voldemort's second reign. Harry's job was to interrogate him for information.

For once Harry had read one of the books Hermione suggested; a book on how to question prisoners and what to look out for. He still didn't feel like he was the least bit prepared. Catch a criminal? He was quite talented in that. Interrogating them once they were caught was an entirely different ball game. The problem was that most of the talented individuals in England worked in Azkaban and were subsequently butchered during the raid which freed prisoners like Bellatrix and Lucius. Moody and Tonks, Harry was told, were also brilliant at interrogation. The Auror department had found itself in the peculiar position of having an entire section completely wiped out. Tracking, defense, guards, containment, reconnaissance, assault, the rescue division... no other section had been so thoroughly massacred.

Therefore people like Harry were shoved into rooms with prisoners and told to 'try their best' until people who fit the position better could be found. Opening up the large iron door to one of Death Eater's holding cell Harry scrunched up his nose in distaste as a smell hit his nose. It was a hulking beast of a man who sat crossed legged in the corner of the room. The smile he gave Harry displayed brilliant wide teeth and pure malleus. The man had been happily waiting for him.

"Heard I'd get you." The man said, good naturedly.

Harry grimaced. It was always a lot worse when they were in a good mood.

"I don't suppose you'd be willing to just tell me the answers to my questions then huh?" Harry asked tiredly. "I want to know everything you know about Wormtail."

"Ministry doesn't bargain. I have no plans to say anything to anyone if I don't get anything out of it. What's the point?" The man said with a shrug. "I already know I have more evidence against me than the

Dark Lord had enemies. The moment I was caught there was no point."

"Why not just give us the answers then? You don't care about your fellow Death Eaters so why not turn them in?" Harry tried.

He had never questioned someone so... casual. It was extremely unnerving.

The man grinned at him toothily.

"I might as well make this fun for me eh? I got nothing better to do. Giving up my fellow Death Eaters would mean that you finish up cleaning faster and then I'll get no more visitors." The man announced amiably.

Harry shuddered. He really hated questioning the ones that clearly weren't there anymore. It was much better to question the angry ones that would let something slip. These ones though... they were just gone. They were far more sadistic and cunning than the others and therefore knew that nothing they did would get them out. This was not like the first time where people like Malfoy could get out if they sold out enough people. Kingsley wasn't letting a single one of them walk unless the person was proven innocent of all charges.

Harry looked down at the man's file; Ray Spinsor. Captured two weeks ago in France. This was the man who spent so much time with Wormtail. The man whom both he and Ron saw die by the hand Voldemort gave him for hesitating to kill him.

"If you don't give me anything I'll make sure you never see another soul again." Harry threatened. "I can't give you any bargains, but I sure as hell can make things worse."

Spinsor's grin only widened.

"I imagine so Potter, but not all of my chips have been taken either. I still have things that can make your own life much worse." The man

said jovially.

"You have nothing." Harry said with a snort.

Spinsor tapped his head.

"I have things in here that would break you." Spinsor said quietly.  
"The way you walked into this room... the way you look at my file with no recognition. It gives me all the power in the world."

Harry closed the file, narrowing his eyes at the man, eyeing the magical chains that kept Spinsor from coming anywhere near him. The man just smiled.

"Is there a reason I should recognize you?" Harry questioned in disbelief.

Maybe he was one of the snatchers in black hoods that captured them and took them to Malfoy Manor. Perhaps he was one of the many countless faces he'd fought in the battles. He could even just be a delusional man who thought too much of his own name.

"You have no idea, do you?" He asked in glee.

"I'm rather tired of your games so unless you spit it out I'll leave you to rot where you belong." Harry told him irritably.

"Harry Potter, the boy who lived, attaching himself to a family of blood traitors like a lost puppy. Everyone in the wizarding world knows about how fond you are of that family. Especially the youngest ones, no?" Spinsor asked.

Harry stiffened. Spinning around and eyeing the man furiously Harry had to hold himself back from smashing his fist into the man's face.

"The little red headed girl you must of fucked by now? Your bestest friend in the whole world... what was his name? Ah... I remember. Ron." Spinsor went on, eyeing his fingernails.

Harry forced himself to relax. The man was just messing with him. Everyone knew about the Weasley's taking him in as if he was their son. Spinsor stopped looking at his nails, eyes bearing into his with fiery intensity. The large bear of a man held up his fingers to show an inch of space.

"During the quidditch world cup I was this close to her. Her neck was so pretty and... delicate. I was gonna snap it, but Dolohov grabbed me and said we had to go." Spinsor told Harry lazily.

Harry grit his teeth to the point they creaked.

"I'm going to make sure that you're placed in the deepest dungeon we have where you won't even get rats for company." Harry hissed.

Turning to leave Harry heard Spinsor say something that froze him to the core.

"Interesting scars Ron has aren't they? Nasty large one at the shoulder. Crisscrossing ones all over his arms and back."

Ron *hated* his scars. He went out of his way to make sure that no one outside of the family knew about them. In the final year at Hogwarts Ron had gone to ridiculous lengths to make sure Seamus and Dean never saw them. Only those who'd gone to the battle of the Department of Mysteries knew about them. And the scar caused by Hermione splinching Ron was something that only Order of the Phoenix members knew about.

Harry turned back the slightest bit, eyes blazing in hatred already. His mind felt like it was moving a hundred miles an hour as he tried to figure out how this man had seen Ron's scars or knew about them. If he knew about the shoulder scar it would mean that it had to have been after the Hocrux hunt... after Ron left for Auror Strategy training.

Harry suddenly felt sick. Had this man encountered Ron in Australia? Oh god. What if that explained why Ron suddenly didn't want him

and Hermione to come visit him? What if that was why Ron suddenly started acting like such a prat and didn't want anything to do with any of them? Spinsor smiled knowingly at the horrified expression slowly making its way onto Harry's face.

"We had so much fun together." Spinsor said wistfully. "Listening to him scream as I ripped his nails off with clippers. Watching him wither in pain under the cruciatus."

Harry felt an animal like rage creep into his soul as he roared out a curse at the man before him. The man slammed against the wall behind him, chains pulling agonizingly with the force of the curse, before a loud crack sounded from the man's head hitting the floor. Realizing what he had done a half second too later Harry bent down to check the man's pulse. Steady. Spinsor had just been knocked out cold. He couldn't bring himself to feel regret though.

Kneeling on the floor Harry stared emptily off into space. Ron had been tortured. His best friend had been tortured and he had to learn it from the mouth of his tormentor. Ron had been distant and angry. Ron had been pushing him and Hermione away for months. Ron had been hold up working nonstop in a hospital and ignoring all the people that loved him... Something clicked. With a start Harry remembered what Spinsor said.

*" Listening to him scream as I ripped his nails off with clippers."*

Ripped off nails. Harry suddenly felt like the world had been twisted again.

*" Imagine losing fingernails, Harry! That really puts our suffering into perspective, doesn't it?"*

Ray Spinsor never stepped foot into Australia.

*" They weren't the brightest. One of them was definitely part troll. The smell off of him..."*



Ray Spinsor was one of the Snatchers that had gotten ahold of Ron. No... Spinsor was a Death Eater. Ron hadn't been caught by Snatchers at all. Ron had lied to them about what really happened. Ron hadn't gotten away with giving them a fake name. They had figured out who Ron was and had tortured him for information... or just tortured him. Looking down at the unconscious Death Eater Harry stood up and left the dungeon. He'd have to come back later. Hands shaking uncontrollably and legs feeling like jello Harry made it all the way up to the upmost level before vomiting in the bathroom.

---

*Ronnie I know that things have been strained between you and the family lately, but I really want you home for Christmas this year. Bill and Charlie's birthdays are both coming up as well. I know you're busy, but they would both love to see you there. We all would.*

*- Your Mum*

---

*Mum... Maybe. It depends on what my shifts are. They're pretty short staffed, but I'll try to make it. -Ron*

# **Last Words Ch10**

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

A/N: Yes I am very much alive and still writing. I hope this is as good as you all hoped it would be.

Please tell me what you think about the technique I used in this chapter. I thought it would be the best way to set it up. If you didn't like how I did it please tell me and I'll try a different approach.

And Please tell me... did you guys like the letters approach last chapter? I'm not sure if it got my point across about their arguing. Would it have been better to just give a brief summary about Ron getting letters?

Is this approach, going back in time to bring the suspense up, good? Or did I utterly fail and need to go back to the drawing board?

"Differences of habit and language are nothing at all if our aims are identical and our hearts are open."

## **Albus Dumbledore**

*Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire.*

Chapter 10: Last Words

*"Where's Ron?" Charlie asked, walking back towards the house.*

*"I don't know. I'm not his keeper," George answered snarkily.*

*George looked around anyways, contradicting his last statement.*

*It had poured recently, leaving the landscape muddy and gray. Perfect for playing hide and seek. Better still for putting their mother into a fit. George could see their mother shouting at Fred and Ginny*

*covered head to toe in the muck. Percy stood just inside the house looking smugly out at them. They'd get him back before long though so George wasn't too bugged by the scrawny four eyed git.*

*" Ron!" Charlie called out into the backyard.*

*Sludge fell forward from Charlie's red hair into his eyes. George snickered as his older brother cursed attempting to wipe it out. The fourteen year old growled, going into the house to find something to get rid of the mud out of his eyes. George idly looked around for the last red head in their game, but couldn't see him. Bill had decided to opt out and go with his girlfriend to dinner. Apparently the sixteen year old was too old to play with them anymore.*

*George moved further into the fields behind their house peering around for Ron. He wasn't looking for the brat. He was just curious was all. Ron had managed to hide from all of them and if he could find out where the kid had gotten too he could use it next time around. That was all.*

*Trailing through the field the eight year old felt his feet sink deeper and deeper till the mud was up passed his ankles. The thick ooze squished pleasantly between his toes. He'd have to make it up to Fred for taking the heat later. Maybe he'd let him do the honors of pranking Percy. Coming out at the top of small drop George hopped off and landed messily five feet below. Mud splashed in all directions. For a second George was frightened when he immediately sunk up to his knees, but relaxed as his feet his bottom. The rocks there actually kinda hurt.*

*Something wrapped around his ankles.*

*Shrieking George twisted and pulled away at the same time, unbalancing himself, and falling fully into the mud.*

*" You screamed like a little girl!" Ron crowed happily.*

*George glowered at the unrecognizable six year old drenched in mud.*

*" Ahahahaha..." Ron laughed, gasping for air.*

*George shoved him roughly back under the mud. Ron coughed and sputtered as he came back up for air, but still grinned madly up at his older brother.*

*" I got you," Ron announced smugly.*

*" Yeah, you got me, and now I'm gone," George growled in annoyance, beginning to climb up the slope.*

*" Wait!" Ron called out, suddenly panicked.*

*" What?" George asked, not slowing down in the least.*

*" I'm stuck," Ron mumbled.*

*" Huh?" George asked turning back to Ron.*

*" My ankles stuck in these roots in the mud." Ron explained, tugging his leg up unsuccessfully to prove a point.*

*" You can't move?" George asked slowly.*

*Ron nodded, his lip sticking out in a pout.*

*George sighed.*

*" If I was Fred you'd have gotten hit with a dozen balls of mud," George told him sternly as he moved back down into the mud pit.*

*" But you're not," Ron answered, confusion clear on his face.*

*George paused, looking up at Ron, before lightly pushing the smaller boy back down into the mud.*

*" It'll be easier to get you out if you're sitting," George mumbled.*

*Their mother always had a hard time telling them apart. It hurt. Not that they would ever admit it to anyone even under threat of torture, but it did hurt. In fact everyone, but Ron and Ginny sometimes mixed them up. For some reason the two youngest had always had a knack for telling them apart.*

*George had to kneel down into the mud in order to get a good grip on the roots. Ron's foot really was stuck fast. He wondered how long Ron had been there, just sitting in the mud. If Ron was quiet enough and had his eyes closed no one would have noticed him because of the dripping muck all over. Ron had probably been trying to get himself free for awhile. Grunting with effort George ripped the roots clean out of the earth one by one. When Ron's foot was finally free he scrambled out of the mud before offering a hand back for George. George gripped it and pulled himself out.*

*" Thanks George," Ron said sincerely.*

*" Just don't tell anyone you managed to scare me and we'll call each other even." George said grudgingly.*

*" Okay," Ron agreed throwing his arms around George in a sloppy hug.*

*Mud spattered across his face.*

*" Of course."*

*" Sorry."*

---

December 18, 1998

It had been three weeks since Ron started rehabilitation to walk after the emergency treatment.

It had been two weeks since Traux left to perform interrogation on Death Eater's.

It had been eight days since...

It had been four days ago that Antea informed him about what happened and that Ron was killing himself.

It had been 24 hours since he'd arrived back home to deliver an important package to the head of Australia's Auror department.

The night Ron disappeared it had started out as a means of getting Ron out of the hospital and to let out some much needed anger and sorrow. Surprisingly Antea had suggested the game. They had already talked about it thoroughly with Ron's healers, and while Dr. Blake and the others were hesitant, it was agreed that if things continued as they were Ron would die. Certain potions had been taken off so that they would not mix badly with the... beverages.

Gathered around a table with a large bottle of vodka in the middle of them he couldn't help, but glance at Ron. His friend was moving food around on his plate, not actually eating anything. Antea gave him a gentle nuzzle in the ribs. Ron glared at her, but shoved a forkful into his mouth. Traux took a large bite of his own food. This wasn't really his thing. Comforting others and being supportive. It had never been his role. Nothing traumatic had ever happened in his life. No old great Aunt dying or accident in the family. Hell... He'd never even been seriously hurt before.

It had taken a while for Traux to convince Ron to come out at all. The redhead had been really difficult with him about it. Not that Traux blamed him. He wouldn't want to go out so soon either. The problem lay in how sick Ron was. Refusing to eat, locking him-self up in the bathroom avoiding people, spending hours outside on the benches in the heat of December, and being difficult with the healers was killing him. The toll was evident by the dark bruises under his eyes and pale yellowish tinge to his face. Traux had actually cringed when he walked through the hospital door to see Ron's gaunt face. The

jacket the redhead wore swamped him, slipping down his shoulder every few minutes, forcing Ron to pull it up irritably.

When they entered the restaurant Ron had given him an unsure glance before sitting down at the table. He and Antea had been trying to coax him to eat more through the meal, inviting him into conversations, making jokes. Ron had simply given them half-hearted attempts at smiles, but otherwise seemed determined to morosely stir his potatoes. Traux gave Antea a look. She nodded and reached for the large bottle of vodka in the middle of the table.

"Alright gents... This is a tradition me ma and me did... tha' she told me about when me gran passed away when I was little. Each of us here gets o' shot of this here vodka. Going around the table we say our goodbyes to the dead... whatever we should 'ave said, wanted ta say, or didn't want to say. Then we all raise our glasses and give our respectful silence before shootin' em back," Antea explained.

Beside him Ron sunk down into his seat.

"I know what you're trying to do and I don't think this is a good idea." Ron rasped.

"Me and me brother never bothered to do this when our parent died. Maybe if we 'ad things could 'ave been different," Antea said quietly.

Traux shot Antea a surprised look. She hadn't told him that. Ron simply sunk further down in his chair, staring at Antea for fifteen agonizing minutes of silence. The air was tense between the three of them. Traux saw Ron's fist tighten. This was it. Ron was going to bolt on them.

"This is a bad idea," Ron mumbled straightening in his chair.

Antea grinned, winking at Traux who was inwardly letting out a giant sigh.

"I'll go first if ye like boyo."

Traux felt awkward between them. He'd never lost anyone before in his life. Filling up three shots he handed one to each of his friends.

"Okay... Ma..." Antea started off uncomfortably. "There's a couple o things I 'ave to own up to. First off... I'm sorry I never visited your grave; not yours or pa's. I couldn't do it. I wasn't ready to let ya go so instead I let Hugo go every day without me. That was wrong and.... Well 'm sorry. When he left we had a huge row. He's probably told ya about it awhile ago... You were always telling us we'd regret leaving things like that unfinished. You were right ma. I wish you were here so you could tell me 'I told ya so ye ditzy git.' I wish you wouldn't have left me like tha', the both of you. I miss you loads ma. I wish you were here." Antea choked on the last part, raising her shot in the air.

Traux and Ron solemnly held up there's as well.

Shooting it back Traux decided that it didn't really make a difference that he'd never experienced anything awful in his life. The important thing was that he was there for the two who had.

---

Two weeks ago

Harry's chest pounded as his fist banged against the door of Shell cottage. Bill was supposed to be home tonight. He and Fleur had been in France with her family for the last week. Fleur had stayed behind, but Bill had needed to get back to his job. Seven days of pacing back and forth at the apartment with Hermione looking at him like he was going crazy, but unsure of what to do about it. He hadn't told her what the Death Eater said. He wouldn't do that to her unless he could get proof that it was true. He hadn't been to see the Death Eater, Ray Spinsor again. He wanted to either go in and rip him apart for what he'd done or go in knowing that the Death Eater was just very good at messing with him.

He'd debated writing Ron about it. What if it was true though? Could he really ask Ron to *write* him about being *tortured* ? He needed to



be face to face with Ron for this. He needed to know if it had really happened before he went demanding answers from Ron.

The door opened to reveal the surprised, scarred face of Bill Weasley. Bill gestured for him to enter. Harry nodded in thanks, not quite able to talk passed the lump in his throat yet. Bill led him into the kitchen, an act that was so much like Molly Weasley that Harry almost cracked a smile. When Bill went about the kitchen making tea and asked him if he wanted sugar in his Harry *did* crack a smile.

"Yes. Thanks Bill," Harry said roughly.

"So what brought you here tonight Harry?" Bill asked casually, but his eyes watched him sharply.

Ron had once warned him that his oldest brother had the keenest mind out of all of them. Percy had intelligence and George was clever, but Bill paid close attention to details. It was like you were an open book to him. Ron confessed that if you wanted to hide something from Bill you had to throw him off your trail; tell him something else. Bill was like a living lie detector though, like Molly, so you had to distract him with the truth. It had been when they were staying with him while they planned their break in of Gringotts. The first night they stayed there Ron had told them this so that they could be prepared to sidestep Bill about what they were doing. He and Hermione hadn't been very good at it, but Ron had been

"There's some things that I need to ask you, about when Ron was here last year," Harry stated bluntly.

"I would think that you would know more about that than me. You three never really left the room you were in," Bill replied dryly.

"No... I mean the first time," Harry clarified.

"Oh, what do you need to know?" Bill asked, eyes watching him.

Harry wiped his hands against his jeans. He'd been thinking about this for seven days now; what to ask, how to go about questioning, things he should say and shouldn't say.

"How long was Ron here for?" Harry demanded.

Bill snorted.

"You mean how much time did he actually spend here or the first time he showed up to the last?" Bill asked.

"What do you mean?" Harry hurriedly asked, nearly tripping over his own words.

"Ron was only ever here long enough to catch some sleep and eat before he was out looking for you two again. He stayed for Christmas Eve and Christmas day at my insistence, but otherwise was gone every morning by time I woke up," Bill answered.

Surprised Harry could only let a small smile of pride slip onto his face as he took this information in.

"Ron never told you huh?"

Harry shook his head.

"Sounds just like Ron."

Taking a deep breath Harry focused on his task again.

"How long was Ron staying here from the first time he arrive till before he left after Christmas?" Harry asked

Bill leaned back in his chair thoughtfully, closing his eyes.

"Let's see... I think it was a little over two weeks, about two and a half," Bill answered.

Harry felt his heart fall into the pit of his stomach. A cold numbness taking over as he allowed those words and all their implications sink in.

"Are you sure?" Harry asked sharply.

Startled, Bill's chair dropped to all fours, the man staring at him with narrowed eyes.

"Yes I'm sure." Bill said slowly. "Why?"

Harry waged a war inside of him for several long minutes trying to decide if he should tell Bill. For so long it had been just the three of them. Luna and Neville were the only ones they ever told anything to. The war was over though and they *needed* to start trusting other people again. Not to mention this was Ron's *brother*. Harry took a deep shuddering breath.

"Ron was gone for more than five weeks," Harry finally relented.

"No," Bill shook his head in denial, "no, he came straight from his escape from the Snatchers."

"I don't think there was ever any Snatchers Bill," Harry told him quietly.

"What?" Bill asked in confusion. "Of course there were Snatchers! Ron had their wands! He was splinched when he escaped them."

"I interrogated a Death Eater last week who claims he tortured Ron. He said he cut Ron's nails off with a muggle tool. He knows all about Ron's scars, including the one on his shoulder. Not only that... He fits the description Ron gave me of one of the Snatchers who 'grabbed' him. And you've just informed me that Ron wasn't with you the entire time he was gone," Harry said shakily, taking his glasses off, and running his hands through his hair.

Bill had gone deathly pale.

"Cut his nails off with a muggle tool?" Bill whispered in horror.

Harry nodded, his head in his hands now.

"You don't think... he wasn't there the whole time right?" Bill asked softly.

"I don't know," Harry admitted, "I was too angry and confused. I left the interrogation. I wanted to make sure that he wasn't just... messing with me."

Bill nodded in understanding.

"I've already set up another interrogation for three days from now. I wanted to wait until after I confirmed that it was a possibility with you," Harry added, his voice becoming hard.

"That's nearly three weeks' time that we don't know where he was Harry," Bill said carefully.

"Yeah."

"I'm going to write Fleur. Ask her if she noticed anything strange or out of norm with Ron when he came to us," Bill said standing up.

Harry felt hesitant though.

"Bill, I don't really think we should involve anyone until we know what really happened," Harry insisted.

"I never said I was going to tell her about this. Fleur trusts me enough to know that it's important without having to know every detail," Bill dismissed.

"Nothing like Hermione or Ginny then," Harry replied ruefully.

Bill shook his head.

"They trust you it's just... their so gung hoe about being involved in every step of every move that it becomes hard to trust them with something little. They can't handle only being trusted with only a small part. It's not that they don't trust your judgment it's that they feel slighted and resentful for being left out of the loop even if you feel it's the best way to handle a situation," Bill explained knowingly. "George, Charlie and you are all the same way."

"Me?" Harry asked incredulously.

"Don't act so surprised. If it was you who I was sending this letter to would you be content with just giving me the information I need or would you try to bargain with me? Give me the information I want in exchange for me telling you what's going on?" Bill asked, raising an eyebrow at him.

Harry opened his mouth and closed it again. He had nothing to say. They both knew he'd want to know what was going on.

---

"Remus and Tonks Lupin... I want to say that I'm still angry with you both. There wasn't... there was no good reason for you both to be out there fighting when you had a newborn waiting for you at home. One of you should have stayed behind," Ron said bitterly into the open air. Traux and Antea stared at him silently, surprised by the anger radiating from those words. "I want you both to know though... I think Harry was a really good choice for godfather. He's taking it really seriously. He'll protect Teddy." Now he was choking up. He couldn't help it. "He's going to grow up to be just as bloody stubborn and stupidly brave as his idiot parents. You should be proud."

Ron swung the shot back at the same time Traux and Antea did, but grimaced at the fiery feeling going down his throat.

---

Twelve days ago

The world was tilted sideways, Ron decided. There was no other explanation to what he was seeing at that moment. Others would argue that he'd been given a dose of potions that had a little too much kick to it, at the current moment in time though, Ron would insist that the world was tilted. Strangely enough, or so it seemed to Ron, everything was staying in place when it should have been sliding to the side.

Dr. Blake had a hard time keeping the grin off his face as Ron pointed this out to him.

Moving to the end of his bed Ron tilted his head to see if he could make the world right side up again.

"Ron," Dr. Blake called out amusedly, "I know you feel a bit funny right now..."

"What? No I feel fine." Ron told him, tilting his head a bit further.

"Yes, I'm sure you do, and I'm sorry about that." Dr. Blake tried again.

"Why are you sorry if I feel fine?" Ron asked curiously, moving off of the bed carefully with his arms spread out to keep balance in the tilted world.

"I really need you to come here so that I can perform your check up." Dr. Blake told him, trying and failing to be stern.

"The worlds messed up and you're worried about my temperature? We need to get ahold of the Aurors!" Ron hissed, glancing around.

"Oh dear," Dr. Blake chuckled, "clearly our new nurse doesn't know what she's doing. You poor sod."

"She tilted the world?" Ron asked incredulously. "That's one powerful witch. I should introduce her to Hermione."

Dr. Blake covered his mouth, stifling a fit of laughter unprofessional to this *very serious* situation.

"I'll introduce you if you promise to come over here," Dr. Blake assured.

"I don't want to meet her! Powerful witches are scary! Hermione sent a barrage of birds at me once!" Ron announced, suddenly stopping his balancing act to hurriedly look around in fear. "She's not here is she? They're going to team up!"

"No Ron, Hermione's not here. No one is going to attack you. Why don't you just sit down on the floor and I'll come to you," Dr. Blake told him gently.

Ron grabbed ahold of the bed and carefully sat down, keeping a firm grip on the metal bar.

"Why are you smiling like that?" Ron asked, tilting his head again.

Dr. Blake sat down on the floor in front of Ron, trying his best to keep the grin off his face.

"I have a patient who was accidentally given a higher dose of his potion than he was supposed to take," Dr. Blake explained. "He's quite out of it right now and he said some things to me that made me laugh."

If possible Ron's head tilted even further to the side.

"Ooooooh, well I'm glad he made you laugh. Everyone needs to laugh," Ron informed him.

Dr. Blake's lips twitched as he performed the spell and pulled the string of magic from Ron. The information swirled onto his paper, the words at a slightly crooked angle.

' *That's what you get for not concentrating while performing the spell,*' Dr. Blake scolded himself.

"Is he gonna be okay?" Ron suddenly asked.

Pausing from looking through the papers Dr. Blake looked at Ron curiously.

"Who?"

"The patient," Ron reminded him, moving his hand out carefully onto the floor.

"He'll be fine once the potion is out of his system." Dr. Blake told him reassuringly.

A red envelop entered the room opening up and forming lips. A young woman's voice burst through the air in a furious growl of the boy's name. Dr. Blake sighed as Ron dove down beside his bed, looking around frantically.

"I thought you said she wasn't here!" He hissed, apparently looking around for birds.

"Incendio," Dr. Blake muttered.

The red envelope burst into flames before becoming ash.

"Howler. Remember Ron? You get one from her at least once a week," Dr. Blake reminded gently.

He'd have that nurse doing cuts and bruises for months.

---

"Da, I'll keep this short, you'd prefer that. I just want to tell ya how sorry I am I didn't keep my promise to you about protecting Hugo. That doesn't fix things, but it needs to be said. I love you." Antea held the shot out and tipped it back. Ron and Traux did the same. The shot hit the table with a loud thud, causing the bar man to send the three of them a warning glare.



Ron held his shot up next, taking a moment to consider what he wanted to say.

"Sirius... We all took quite a blow from losing you. You were brilliant. I never did... I know I teased you about it a few times... about you breaking my leg... but I never did tell you that I forgive you for that. And thanks for Pig... he's the best gift I've ever gotten. I know I complain about him a lot, but I love the little guy. I want you to know that." Ron stated as firmly and seriously as if Sirius were right in front of him. He could almost hear the man chuckling.

---

Eleven days ago

"Back already? I thought you'd be gone at least a month," Spinsor mumbled.

Harry watched the large man shift into a sitting position. The chains connecting him to the wall and suppressing his magical energy clinked and clanked loudly against the ground and each other. Spinsor's fingers traced the still healing wound on his head from their last encounter. Apparently none of the guards he'd informed of his attack on the Death Eater saw fit to call a mediwizard. That fact left a sick satisfaction in him.

"How long was Ron held captive by you lot?" Harry snarled.

"Straight to the point again, eh? Why don't you just ask him yourself?" Spinsor asked.

Harry raised his wand and whispered a spell. The chains pulled out, forcing Spinsor's arms up into the air so that they hung parallel to his body.

"I can make all your body parts go in a different direction. Not the worst torture in the world, but it will get worse the longer you stay here like that," Harry threatened.

"What's keepin' you from asking the brat huh? I wonder if the rumors going around are true then, that Ron Weasleys dead," Spinsor spoke thoughtfully, almost as if he was talking to himself.

Harry spoke the spell again and watched with a great deal of relish as the man yelped in pain at having one of his legs pulled backwards so that his whole weight was carried by his suspended arms.

"Answer the question," Harry demanded.

Spinsor smirked at him through his pain.

"What if I told you he sang like a canary for us? When I had him screaming in pain on the ground he begged me to stop. He told us everything," Spinsor crowed.

"He told you nothing," Harry hissed.

"How do you know?" Spinsor asked.

"I know Ron," Harry replied with confidence.

"So you're saying that there was never a moment when your friend could break? There was never a moment when he became frustrated or exhausted? Never a time when he abandoned you?" Spinsor questioned softly.

*' He knows.' A voice whispered. 'He knows Ron left us. How could he know if Ron didn't tell them?'*

"Everybody's got their breaking point Potter. You think your friends inhuman or somet'in?" Spinsor questioned silkily. "We had him locked up in that room for a while. We tried all sorts of things. There was no hope of anyone coming for him, how did he escape us unless he told us about you?"

*' Never. Ron would never have come back if he'd done such a thing. He would have warned us and killed himself if he told.'* Harry thought furiously.

"Exactly how long did you have him?" Harry growled.

"Long enough. How was living in that tent?" Spinsor asked casually.

Harry felt the bottom drop out of his stomach.

' *No... no, no, no, no... he would never have told them.*' Harry told himself firmly even as his hands began to shake. He balled them into fists to still the motion.

"A tent?" Harry asked incredulously, trying to display an air of casual contempt. "He told you we lived in a tent?"

"He told us more than that. We know about Dumbledores involvement as well. Never had the chance to bargain the information off to the dark lord, but we did have it," Spinsor assured him happily.

"Then please..." Harry groused, "tell me about this world of information."

"I want a blanket," Spinsor declared instead, "I'll give you something for a blanket."

"Blanket's not gonna do you much good hung like that," Harry pointed out darkly.

"Let me down and give me a blanket and I'll give you a memory of the Weasley. If I'm lying it's not like you don't have the power to just hang me again," Spinsor pointed out.

Harry growled, pacing back and forth as he thought it over.

"You're not going to give me anything useful," Harry stated, knowingly.

"Your only real want is to know what happened to him, right? Lie to your director all you want. We both know what you're really looking for," Spinsor told him, grinning wolfishly.

Harry's fist clenched tightly. Staring angrily down at the corner of the cell rather than the man's face Harry already knew what he was going to do.

"Two favors, being let down and being given a blanket, that means you give me two memories." Harry bargained.

Spinsor's crooked teeth flash his way.

"Deal."

---

"Hugo... you're a lil' shit and don't let anyone ever tell ya otherwise. I'm still so angry with you abou' what you did. I want ta strangle ya and hug ya all at the same time. I want ta slap you and never let you go. Nothing hurt more than losing you and I just... I just want to tell you I'm sorry I wasn't there when you needed me. If we weren't so pig headed and stubborn I probably woulda been. I'm sorry I never went with ya to their graves and I'm sorry I allowed ya to go to Auror training without even saying goodbye. I wish I would 'ave been there for ya like I should 'ave been. I love you and don't you ever think differently," Antea told him firmly.

"Brilliant," Ron muttered.

---

10 days ago

Ron limped into the room using the walls for support. He still wasn't completely recovered, but he could at least walk on his own. Slumping into the seat beside Mary, Ron propped his knees up against the hospital bed.

"So how's she doing?" Ron asked tiredly.

"She's fine. They just found a small complication with her lungs so they're postponing her last treatment till they figure out what's causing it," Mary told him, adjusting the baby on her lap.

Ron gestured for her to give him Ryan which she did with a grateful smile.

The baby yawned tiredly, snuggling close to his new holder.

"She knocked out or just asleep?" Ron asked as Mary stood up and stretched.

"Just asleep."

"You should get some sleep too," Ron noted, seeing the dark circles under her eyes, "a couple hours at least, I've got the baby."

"You're a sweet kid Ron. I'm up for the day though, I'll be fine," Mary told him.

Rose stirred, causing both of them to look towards the bed. Dark brown hair slid across her face as Rose turned over and cuddled closer to her pillow.

"Go eat at least," Ron urged.

"Only if you eat as well," Mary compromised.

Ron grimaced, but nodded.

"I'll be back in a few then," Mary announced.

Before leaving the room Mary turned back to Ron.

"Oh... and Ron?" She called.

Ron turned slightly, making sure not to bump the baby.

"Yeah?" Ron asked.

"If the world starts tilting just put Ryan on the bed."

Ron blushed in humiliation, scowling at the woman as she left the room snickering.

"Healer Pam told her," a small voice claimed.

Ron turned to Rose whose hair was sticking up in random patches as she blinked rapidly in an attempt to wake up. Gingerly sitting up Rose smiled at him before leaning forward and gently patting the baby's head.

Ron made a face as he imagined the two women conspiring against him in some dark hallway. The baby had probably even giggled at his expense. He sent the sleeping infant a betrayed look.

"I told them it wasn't very nice to laugh at something you couldn't control like that," Rose told him proudly, slightly breathless.

"You're my only friend Rose," Ron told the little girl in exasperation.

Rose blushed, grinning up at him, before shyly down casting her eyes.

"Ron... can I ask you something?" Rose said softly.

Ron pushed his knees off of the bed, sitting up straighter so that he could hold the baby more easily.

"Yeah, sure, what is it?"

"Um... well... I was wondering if maybe... would it be okay if... if I called you dad?"

Ron felt his heart drop into the pit of his stomach.

"Dad?" Ron whispered.

The baby woke up, making unhappy whining noises. Ron brought the child up to his chest, supporting the head, and allowing the little guy to grab ahold of his bright red hair.

"Rose... I'm not really dad material," Ron told her gently.

At Rose's heartbroken expression Ron got up off the chair and sat down next to her.

"Look... I'm more like a big brother you know? Dads are old and stuffy right?" Ron tried to joke.

Her lip trembled and she turned her face away from him.

"Yeah," she agreed dejectedly.

"Hey now... why don't we play a game, huh? I could show you a new trick," Ron told her, winking.

She turned away from him, burying her head into her pillow again.

"I don't really feel like playing right now," Rose answered.

The baby yanked extra hard on his hair, causing Ron to wince. Tugging his hair out of tiny hand's surprisingly strong grip Ron made a face at the baby. Ryan simply smiled a toothless grin.

"Rose... Your mum will meet a great guy one day. Somebody who you can call dad," Ron told her.

"Yeah... can you leave me alone for a bit?" Rose begged.

Hurt, but not willing to show it, Ron nodded and carefully stood up. Keeping one hand on the wall Ron sat down with the baby just outside of Rose's room. He couldn't risk going any further with the baby in his arms. There was a disgusting sensation of having gums against his skin. Ryan was sucking on his shoulder. He'd have to tell Mary the baby was hungry when she got back.

When the sounds of quiet crying emerged from the room Ron froze up. Leaning against the wall behind him Ron closed his eyes tightly for a moment. Ryan made cooing sounds up at him, making it difficult to think. He honestly didn't know what to do, but he couldn't

leave her like that. Grabbing the doorknob Ron pulled himself to his feet and reentered the room.

"I thought I told you to go away," Rose's muffled voice wheezed out.

Ron sat carefully on the bed, looking around, hoping that the walls would tell him how he should handle this. No answer came. Reaching forward with one arm Ron awkwardly pulled Rose up and against his chest next to the baby. Rose resisted at first, but then fell against his chest, hitting his healing torso. Ron inwardly flinched.

Ron put an arm around the little girl's shaking shoulders.

"My mommy isn't very good at dating," Rose admitted.

"It's okay... listen, just for now, you can..." Ron began.

"Rose! What's wrong sweetie?" Mary asked, bustling into the room with three trays of food.

She swept Rose into a hug, holding the little girl tightly. Rose wiped her eyes with her sleeves before smiling up at her mother.

"M fine. I just had a bad dream," Rose lied.

"Well I got your favorite from Mopsy, lemon chicken and mashed potatoes, so this should cheer you right up!" Mary announced.

Rose gave her mother a weak smile before taking the tray. Ron gave her an understanding smile that she returned more slowly, but no less sincerely. She'd only taken the purple potion that caused you to be nauseous forty minutes ago. Its effects were still going strong.

They'd continue talking later.

---

"Moody I want you to know that I curse that slime ball Mundungus for what he did at least once a week. You're the craziest and greatest Auror I've ever met or that I ever will meet. I really wish I could have



had the chance to be one of your students." Ron announced sincerely, shooting back the sixth shot of Vodka.

Ron gestured for Traux to pour them another. All three of them looked a bit buzzed, but still fairly intact surprisingly.

"Dumbledore... First of all fuck you. Worst. Mission. Ever. You could have very well given us a bit more info about it considering it was your bloody plan. And second... thank you... for everything else you did." Ron said the last part softly. There really wasn't any need to say anything else. He knew Dumbledore would understand what he meant. Traux and Antea peered at him curiously, but he just gulped the shot down.

"Ron... how many... how many people did you lose?" Antea questioned.

"You two wanted to play this game... let's finish it." Ron replied instead.

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10 days ago (Night time)

Diving into the memory inside the pensieve Harry found himself standing in what appeared to be a large, brightly lit cellar. Kingsley and Hestia emerged beside him soon after. Looking around he spotted what he was searching for. Spinsor was standing beside Wormtail and a man who Harry had never seen before. The three of them were standing before something.

Harry took off.

"I must say I'm quite impressed someone like you managed to get your hands on him Spinsor," Harry heard the unknown Death Eater mutter.

Harry stopped beside them, along with Kingsley and Hestia, to see what he'd feared for the past two weeks.

It was Ron. Memories didn't lie. Ron really had been captured.

They had his arms and legs bound to a stone chair. The left side of his face was badly bruised and he seemed to be breathing heavily. Harry felt Kingsley large hand squeeze his shoulder.

Why hadn't Ron ever told him about this?

Ron's head lolled to the side as he tried to keep himself from losing consciousness.

Harry felt his hands twitch with the need to get Ron out of the chair, but there was nothing he could do, no person he could fight. The Death Eater Ray Spinsor was already in custody. It was his memory they were viewing. Nothing could be changed or altered.

"No need to insult him Press. Let's just be glad that he did," Wormtail murmured as he pulled something out of his pocket.

Harry felt his insides turn to ice.

"Veritaserum," Spinsor said in awe.

"La Bocca della verita. The mouth of Truth," Press spoke, his voice also laced with astonishment.

"If you would..?" Wormtail asked, gesturing towards Ron.

Press smiled as he moved behind Ron. The man grabbed a large chunk of Ron's hair and forced him head upwards. Ron kept his lips tightly closed, his good eye glaring defiantly at the two men before him.

Harry couldn't breathe as he watched the scene unfold. Someone took his left hand. Glancing back he saw Hestia giving him a tight, but reassuring smile.

Spinsor raised his wand and pointed it at Ron.

"Imperius! Open your mouth!" Spinsor snapped.

Harry felt sick as he watched Ron's blue eyes turn a milky shade of white. Ron's lips stayed tightly shut for nearly a minute before unwillingly opening when Spinsor repeated the curse.

Wormtail moved forward and thrust the tip of the bottle into Ron's mouth. Three drops, anymore and the victim would be a gibbering mess rather than an unwilling speaker of the truth. Press pushed Ron's head forward harshly.

"Where is Harry Potter heading?" Wormtail demanded.

Ron took in a long shuddering breath.

"I don't know." Ron answered through gritted teeth.

"Where is he at right now?" Spinsor asked.

Harry, Kingsley and Hestia watched in horror as Ron fought against the truth serum, but his mouth opened against his will and he spoke in an emotionless voice.

"On a toadstool," Ron answered.

The Death Eaters and Harry, Kingsley and Hestia all blinked in confusion.

"What did you say?" Wormtail demanded, sticking the point of his wand into Ron's neck.

"On a toadstool," Ron repeated obediently.

Then it clicked causing Harry to laugh incredulously.

*" Harry let's put the tent somewhere else. There's a big toadstool here," Hermione stated as she made to move her portion of the tent in another direction.*

*" Really Hermione, who cares if there's a mushroom there or not, the tent will flatten it anyways!" Ron snapped from where he was setting up the enchantments.*

*" Right, right... that was very silly of me," Hermione admitted, blushing scarlet.*

*He and Hermione set the tent down.*

"Where is Harry Potter?" Press screamed into Ron's face.

"On a toadstool," Ron repeated.

A slap rang through the air. Press had hit Ron across the face. Harry snarled angrily, unable to do anything, incapable of changing a memory.

"What is Harry Potter's greatest weakness?" Wormtail asked, changing tactics.

"What you already attack and search for; the people he loves," Ron answered.

"Useless," Press muttered angrily. "We don't have a means to send a message to Potter so how can we use something like that?"

"Public display?" Wormtail said thoughtfully. "Bet if we announce to the ministry and our master that Ron Weasley is here Potter will come running."

"Let's not get hasty. Might as well have some fun with the brat beforehand right?" Spinsor murmured, stepping up to Ron.

"What is your greatest fear?" Spinsor demanded, voice dripping in anticipation.

"Not being strong enough for Harry and Hermione," Ron answered.

Harry choked. Hestia's grip on his hand tightened. Kingsley hand moved from his shoulder to a one armed hug.

"Clearly that's already the case isn't it? You've already been captured and you're giving us everything we'll need hm?" Spinsor playfully teased.

"We don't have time for this you dimwit," Press sternly announced. "Tell us about everything you know concerning the Order!"

Harry cringed. He could feel Kingsley and Hestia becoming tense as well.

"The order up usually starts with the captain, then the seeker and after that comes the beaters..." Ron began listing the Order of the Gryffendor quidditch team.

"No, stop! Tell us about the Order of the Phoenix you belong to!" Wormtail corrected, sending an irritated glare towards Press.

"Me and Hermione think Dumbledore chose to call his group the Order of the Phoenix because he owned this Phoenix named Fawks. He keeps it in his office. We think that Dumbledore's a bit obsessed with.."

"Stop!" Snapped Press angrily. The man pressed his wand into Ron's chest in fury as he turned to the other two. "This brat has been trained to resist Veritaserum!"

Spinsor cursed.

Harry felt deep relief and bewilderment. As far as he knew Ron hadn't undergone such training.

"What are Harry Potter's plans?" Press asked.

"To take down Voldemort," Ron answered.

"Everything! Tell us everything that has to do with his plans to take down the dark lord!" Wormtail yelled in frustration.

Harry, Kingsley and Hestia waited with baited breaths for Ron to speak. Ron's mouth opened, his breath shuddered, his mouth closed. Harry watched in both pride and fear as Ron's entire body began to tremble and his breathing became ragged. Press moved forward and ripped Ron's head upwards again by his hair. Ron made not a sound.

"What are Harry Potter's plans to take down the Dark Lord?" Press hissed.

Sweat dripped down Ron's forehead and down his neck as the three Death Eaters continued screaming at him. Press slammed Ron's head against the back of the stone chair in frustration making the three Order members flinch, but Ron still wouldn't say anything.

"Very rare to find someone capable of fighting Veritaserum to this extent," Kingsley murmured with pride, "to be able to choose something related enough to answer the question, but not close enough to actually give an answer is extraordinary."

"When..." Ron gasped and shuddered, but the emotionless voice remained. "In fifth year we made plans. Prepare people with defense against the dark arts. He suggested all sorts of plans... shower him with fluffy kittens and pink everything..."

Harry didn't know whether to smile or cry.

*" Maybe Voldemort's allergic to anything good!" Harry laughed as they walked down the corridor towards the Great Hall.*

*" Throw Umbridge's pink office at him," Ron snickered.*

*" Fluffy kittens and pink everything... we'll just chuck it at his head and run," Harry agreed.*

"... make him the defense against dark arts teacher..."

*" You know just once I would like to have a DADA teacher who sticks around for more than a single year!" Hermione snapped in exasperation.*

*" Quirrell, Lockhart, Lupin, Crouch Jr., Umbridge... I don't know Hermione I'm kinda hoping this one kicks the bucket too," Ron said thoughtfully.*

*" That's how well defeat Voldemort," Harry announced, ignoring Ron's wince at the name. "We'll make him the DADA instructor for next year."*

*" Absolutely brilliant! Why didn't I think of that before?" Ron asked in faked awe, trying not to show that the name affected him.*

Harry felt a deep gratitude swelling inside of him as he continued to listen to his best friend's emotionless voice.

"... feed him Hagrid's cooking..."

*Ron banged one of Hagrid's attempts at bread against the wall with a grimace on his face.*

*" One of these days we're going to have to tell Hagrid the truth about his cooking," Ron announced.*

*" Well... we certainly can't keep shoving them into our pockets while he's not looking," Hermione admitted.*

*" They're deadly they are. Don't suppose we can get Snape to deliver these to You-Know-Who? Fix all our problems then. Get rid of the things Hagrid calls food and get rid of him all at the same time," Ron suggested wistfully.*

*" We're not supposed to talk about Snape," Hermione hissed.*

*"He's got a point though," Harry said. "All our problems gone by poisoning Voldemort with Hagrid's cooking. Justice if I've ever heard it."*

Harry was dragged from the memory to the one in the pensieve by the sound of a fist slamming into Ron's face. Harry watched horror struck as Ron spit out blood.

"Who is the Secret Keeper of the Order of the Phoenix?" Wormtail tried.

"Fuck you," Ron hissed.

"The truth serums' worn off," Press stated unnecessarily.

"Then we'll just give him more," Wormtail said, pulling out the bottle.

"And get more of this bullshit?" Press demanded, annoyed.

"Besides... more than one dose within a week causing a human to be turned into a babbling mess. He'd be of no use to anyone then."

"There's more than one way to skin a cat," Spinsor stated knowingly. The large man roughly pushed Press out of the way to stand before their prisoner.

Harry felt dread inside of him as he saw what was coming next.

"Ron!" Harry screamed. Arms pulled him backwards and kept him from running to his friend.

"Crusio!" Spinsor roared gleefully.

Ron's screams filled the large cellar, echoing off the walls, and around them. Harry ripped his arms away from them and ran forward, staring helplessly at the image of his friend, his brother being tortured.

"This can stop if you just be a good little boy and give me the information we want," Spinsor hissed, cutting the curse short.



Ron's breath hitched as he gasped. Dirty red hair fell in front of blue eyes. A dry chuckle escaped Ron's cracked and bloody lips. Harry took a step back staring at Ron with wide eyes. The laugh gained volume, echoing off the walls, unnerving the men in front of him. Harry's insides twisted unpleasantly.

*"Everybody's got their breaking point Potter."*

Ron lifted his head revealing a stream of tears.

"I was so afraid that something had happened to my family that I ran off without thinking. I wanted to make sure that they were okay and hold them in my arms again." Ron whispered brokenly. "I was so selfish and needy that I abandoned my best friends. Not only was I not able to see them, but I put them in danger by being caught. So try your worst you bloody fucking piece of shit... I can... I can at least make sure I die for them... if nothing else."

Harry stared hopelessly at Ron, his hand sinking through Ron's own trembling one.

*'Was this when the trembling in his hands started? All this time ago?'* Harry thought shakily.

"How noble of you," Spinsor remarked snidely, "but let's see how long that lasts. *Crusio!*"

Ron's screams filled the air again. Harry felt arms wrapping around him from behind.

"Kingsley's going to stay. You don't need to see this," Hestia told him, being forced to yell over the noise.

Harry could do nothing but nod. He couldn't stand there and watch anymore. Reentering Kingsley's office Harry had to sit down.

"How could he?" Harry whispered.

"The truth serum is very strong. It's amazing he fought it so well. He gave nothing important away. You should be proud of him." Hestia told him quietly.

"Not that. Merlin... not that," Harry said burying his head in his hands.

"Then what..." Hestia began.

"How could he have lied to us all this time?" Harry snapped.

Hestia went quiet.

"I've told him everything... every time something happened I told them even when others told me not to. Yet he never said anything about this," Harry said angrily.

"Why do you think he didn't?" Hestia asked him softly.

His fingers dragged through his hair as he stared at the floor.

"I don't know," Harry said honestly.

"Has he ever not told you anything before?" Hestia pushed.

Harry leaned back and closed his eyes trying to think.

"He's never had anything to hide before," Harry said truthfully.

"Are you sure about that?" Hestia asked. "Or has he simply just not told you?"

"We've been pretty much inseparable since we started school together. If something was wrong I would have noticed," Harry told her firmly.

"People don't just hide bad things. They hide happy moments they want to keep to themselves or dreams they have or any number of things. Sometimes people simply don't tell you because they don't

think to tell you about it. Sometimes they don't tell you because they think you're better off not knowing or that it wasn't that important," Hestia said wisely.

"What Ron thinks is important to know and what I think are important to know are different," Harry said irritably.

"Maybe that's the case here," Hestia said thoughtfully.

"He didn't omit information though... he lied," Harry bit out.

"And I suppose you've never lied to him then have you?" Hestia asked dryly. "Or are you trying to tell me you've told him about every shameful, embarrassing moment you've ever experienced? Have you told him about your darkest, most selfish thoughts? I know I certainly haven't told anyone of mine."

No. Of course not. He was distinctly reminded of the time he'd been angry and jealous that Ron had been made a prefect in his place. He would never have told Ron that. The fact that he'd destroyed Dumbledore's office in fifth year, throwing a temper tantrum of grief and rage about Sirius, yet had neglected asking about how Ron, Hermione and the others were. He hadn't asked if they were okay, Dumbledore had informed him after his screaming bout. They risked their lives for Sirius and he hadn't even thought of them. That was something he'd take to his grave.

"Some things aren't about trust Harry," Hestia explained quietly. "sometimes it's about priority, sometimes necessity, other times it's just simply forgotten, while other moments it's about how ready the person is."

That sounded an awful lot like something Moody or Dumbledore would say.

Harry nodded. Leaning back in the chair he found himself staring at Kingsley's enchanted ceiling. There was a lion made of stars

yawning lazily. He focused on that rather than the image of Ron tied to the chair.

"Harry..." Hestia's voice sounded hesitant.

Harry peered at the woman, waiting expectantly for what she had to say.

"I think that there's something I should tell you," Hestia began softly.

Harry straightened in his seat, giving her his full attention.

"What is it?" Harry questioned.

"I had a mission a bit ago where I was sent to..."

At that moment Kingsley reemerged from the pensive. His face was grim as he sat down in his chair.

"He didn't say anything. He fell unconscious," Kingsley informed them wearily.

"The next step in this case is to go to Ron then," Hestia announced decisively. "He might have seen something in there that could explain why someone is impersonating Wormtail."

"I'll go," Harry immediately volunteered.

"No, I have a man down there already. I'll send him a patronus." Kingsley announced.

"Sir I need to see Ron anyways. He's my best friend. Now that it's been confirmed I'm going to take the first port key out there with Hermione. I'd rather it be us that talks to him about this first than one of your men. No offense," Harry added at the end.

"So you're going to tell Hermione then?" Hestia asked.

"I never had any intentions of hiding it from her. I just wasn't going to tell her about Ron being tortured if it wasn't true," Harry replied.

"And the rest of the family?" Hestia dug.

"I... I figure out what to do after Hermione and I have talked to Ron," Harry sighed.

"Harry," Kingsley began carefully. "Perhaps you should postpone your interrogation till after Christmas at least. There's no need to drag all of this up before everyone gets together. Molly tells me that Ron is trying to get off of work to come see all of you. It will give Hermione time to let all of this sink in as well. Tell her after the holidays and when the time comes you can talk to Ron about it."

Harry paused, staring at Kingsley suspiciously, but taking his suggestion seriously. Something didn't feel right, but the points he made were fair. After Percy had made his little entrance during Christmas their sixth year Molly had been in tears for what felt like the rest of the break. George, Fred, Ginny and himself had been furious. It hadn't been the best break.

There was no doubt in his mind that their talk with Ron about what happened would lead to a fight between them. Hermione would no doubt take lead in their questioning and Ron would either shut them out or scream back. Ron obviously had held no intentions of ever telling them about it. If Harry hadn't been lucky enough to interrogate one of them that captured Ron he never would have found out. There would have been no reason to question Ron's story.

Not only that, but they hadn't been on best terms with Ron for nearly two months. They'd been arguing viciously back and forth through letters. Hermione had sent Ron two howlers just this month alone and it was only the seventh of December. Suddenly barging in and demanding answers that happened a year ago would probably only make things worse.

"You're still going to ask him about it though right? Some stranger is going to go up to him and start questioning him about... about that," Harry said, gesturing towards the pensive.

"There are a lot of other cases to be worked on. The Aurors and the Order are stretched thin attempting to capture all the left over Death Eaters and cleaning up the mess left behind by Voldemort. I think waiting after the holidays and working on other things would be fine," Kingsley said slowly.

"Thank you," Harry told Kingsley sincerely.

Rather than accept his show of gratitude Kingsley seemed upset by them. His entire frame seemed to sag at the simply two words.

"Please," Kingsley said sternly, "do not thank me yet. Wait until after you talk to Ron. I have a feeling it will not be a pleasant conversation."

Harry nodded in understanding before leaving the office to meet up with Hermione.

They needed to have a long talk.

"Why did you do that?" Hestia asked, unsettled.

"Ron is only just barely able to walk. Unleashing Harry and Hermione on him right now might prove damaging. In their haste to do what is right the two of them often cause more harm than good. Allowing Ron a few weeks to get stronger is the best I can do though. I believe keeping them from Ron for any longer than that will prove impossible," Kingsley explained tiredly.

"You really think it would hurt Ron for them to go see him now?" Hestia questioned.

"You have not spent nearly as much time with them as I have. To say that the three of them are relentless is an understatement. The same

trait that allows them to work so well together is also what cripples them when they clash," Kingsley noted.

"But surely they wouldn't push if they saw the condition he's in." Hestia insisted.

"Being soft spoken and understanding is not their forte. They would not mean to, but their attempts at being gentle or patient have proved to be quite devastating in the past," Kingsley said with an almost fond chuckle.

She'd probably spend all night wondering what that meant.

"And Hestia," Kingsley said as he walked towards the entrance to his office.

"Yes sir?"

"I would appreciate it if you would not inform anyone of missions I give you that are meant to be kept quiet."

"Ah... you heard me then?"

"Yes, yes I did."

---

"Snape. Snape. What the hell can I say? You're by far the bravest bloke I've ever met. Much braver than Dumbledore and I mean that. I'm sorry that we hated you till the very end. You didn't deserve that." Ron mumbled.

Holding out and shooting back the eighth shot of the night Ron felt more than a little tipsy now. Traux looked ready to quit, but Antea was still going strong. It may have been the liquor, but Ron found this just the tiniest bit funny. He had warned them that this wasn't a good idea to do before hand and he didn't feel like stopping until he said his final words to each of the people he wanted to say them to.

"Collin, Kid... I'm sorry I gave you such a hard time about getting you Harry's autograph. It was kinda funny though... No, nooooo I really am sorry. You were such a great kid. You never stopped talking, but you were great. Ginny and everyone really missus... misses you. She says you were bloody brilliant when you were fighting though. I know you gave them one hell of a fight." Ron stated fiercely. An image of Collin Creevy smiling with his oversized camera around his neck came to mind. It made his lips twitch in a smile of his own. Both Traux and Antea were staring at Ron in alarm.

They had known about the war, but Ron *never* spoke of it.

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9 days ago (Early Morning)

George watched people walk in and out of his shop. He was exhausted. Lee hadn't been able to put as many hours into manning the front desk as usually leaving him with dealing with the customers and working on products. Outside people were busy rushing through the snow storm to get home. It would be the first Christmas since Voldemort's defeat and everyone was in good spirits.

On the counter of his shop was a sheet of paper he'd been trying to fill for several hours now in between customers and his tinkering. There were several lines crossed out and starts of sentences left sitting abandoned. He'd pulled out one of Ron's last letters again. Ron hadn't written him in a while. It had been nearly a month and he was getting antsy, especially with what their dad let slip a few days ago.

*" George, I was wondering if you could convince Harry and Hermione to come over this weekend for dinner when you come? I know their very busy, but Molly could really use some cheering up," Arthur asked, trying to keep his voice light.*

*" Sure. I'll drag them out. I think they get Teddy this weekend too so mum can cuddle him while we're all here," George said with a smirk.*



*" Wonderful, that should distract her for a bit," Arthur said happily.*

*" Distract her from what?" George asked, suspicious.*

*" Oh it's nothing, Ron just... just some things me boy," Arthur mumbled.*

*" What did Ron do now?" George snapped, immediately angry.*

*Arthur looked startled at the anger there. He had neglected to show his dad the letter Ron wrote him.*

*" He just gave us a scare is all," Arthur said airily, trying to be casual.*

*Arthur could never pull off casual though.*

*" A scare?" George said softly, his anger being replaced by concern.*

*" It's nothing. Ron asked us not to say anything about it. He doesn't want to upset anyone. I'm sorry George. You know how bad I am at this. This is why I always got guard duty rather than handling more delicate situations for the Order. Drat," Arthur announced looking thoroughly annoyed with himself.*

*" Dad what happened? I'll write Ron myself if you don't tell me," George demanded.*

*" Promise you won't say anything to anyone? Ron didn't want any of us to know. We wouldn't have known except your mother went into the kitchen late one night and saw Ron's hand at mortal peril," Arthur explained hurriedly.*

*" What?" George hissed.*

*" There was an accident; a teenager was brought in who Ron was helping in the hospital. The teenager was carrying a dark magical object though and when Ron accidentally touched it the thing slammed him with a lot of dark magic. He was hospitalized for a week. If the dark object had been any stronger it would have killed*

*him. He's alright now though. Kingsley and Hestia spent a good deal of time there helping him. Ron even wrote your mother and I letters saying he was perfectly fine. It shook your mother up though," Arthur explained.*

George scowled down at the paper again. It had been the same week he'd threatened to go see him. Ron had purposefully been trying to piss him off, a fact he'd been well aware of at the time, and George had allowed himself to be pissed off. He'd allowed himself to be manipulated.

If Fred were here he'd be angry with the both of them. He'd slap George and then go to Australia and smack Ron.

He wasn't at all sure what to do. He was a bit hurt that Ron hadn't written him in so long. He'd gotten accustomed to and looked forward to Percy and Ron's letters each week. Not that he'd ever admit that even under torture. Even admitting it to himself had taken several months to accept. He wasn't even sure what the problem was. They'd made up since Ron pissed him off with the stuff about Fred. Ron had written a few letters since then.

They'd been further in between though. Rather than getting one every week he'd gotten one every two weeks and then they'd suddenly stopped. He still wrote to their parents. Ron was still arguing with everyone else. They still got letters. He didn't though and he couldn't figure out why. To be fair no one had gotten a letter from Ron in a few weeks. The only reason they knew Ron was alright was because Kingsley had visited Ron again. Being the Minister of Magic had its perks at times.

Fred frowned and pulled out his financial records. The shop was doing great. It was shopping season after all. That was problem though. He had the money, but not the time. He couldn't simply leave his own shop in the middle of the busiest time of the year just to scold his little brother.

As much as that thought was appealing.

The shop would be closed for a few days at the beginning of next week so that he could be with his family, but he would be working Christmas Eve in order to pull in the many desperate last minute shoppers for the holiday. The shop would be closed on Christmas day though. There was no getting around that. His mother would crucify him if he didn't at least spend Christmas day with them.

Ron was going to be there in a little over a week any ways.

George pulled out another piece of paper. He'd channel Fred then. Make it short and simple. He could wait a little.

*Ron, we need to talk when you get here.*

*-George*

---

"Lavender... Thanks for being my first kiss. You were good... I mean nice." Ron blinked, his words slurring a bit now. "It was really horrible to see you like that. All dead and gone and bloody. You didn't... it shouldn't have happened. I want you to know that you would have gone and done great things after graduating." Ron tried to explain.

His words were messing with him though. Like they were slipping in his mouth. He wasn't even paying attention to anyone else at the table anymore. They both seemed fuzzy. Even Antea had stopped to listen. None of them had expected *this* when Traux thought of the idea to help Ron.

"Crabbsey... You were the dumbest bloke I've ever met. You were cruel and a nasty piece o' work and you 'aven't changed since we were twelve years old. What you did... you nearly killed all of us. BUT!" Ron said, raising his glass. "BUT you didn't 'eserve to die like that... No one deserves to die like that so... so... so even though you cast the... thing... the spell I hope that it was fast. It was painless... but I hope it was fast." Ron said, shaking now.

The sounds of Crabbe's scream as he fell into the fire echoing in his head.

Ron took a deep breath. It felt good. He felt jittery and warm and sad and angry and hurt and... and a million other emotions, but it felt so good to be able to say these things out loud. Something warm touched his cheeks. It was a gentle touch and he almost wondered if they were *really* there with him at the table. Later he'd realize it was his own tears sliding down his face.

"Dobby you wonderful, brave son o' a bitch... sank you. Thank you 'or saving us... all of us. So many times... no' just tha' one time, but the others too. Ya got us all out... they were... they were..." Ron took a shuddering breath, staring blearily down at the next shot as if he wasn't quite certain what to do with it. "They were torturing 'ermione and you saved her. You got us out from being prisoners... Sank you." Ron nearly shouted in his slurred, rasping voice.

Ron squinted his eyes. The room looked like it was spinning. Had he been given another accidental overdose of potions? No... no he was... he was saying goodbye and taking shots. It kinda felt the same though. There were still others though... people he wanted to thank and hold and... there were still others he had to say something to. Things he hadn't gotten to say.

"Hedwig you beausiful zird... I wanna telz you tha's you are the best. 'ank you for taking the killing curse fer Harry. If 'Arry or 'Mione died I'd die. You're beausiful." Ron muttered.

Traux pulled on Ron's arm, trying to pry the half-full shot from Ron's hands.

"Mate... I'm sorry. I think that's it for you. I didn't know and I'm sorry. We're just going to go home now okay?" Traux said softly.

Ron shook his head. Putting up his hand and sticking up four fingers.

"Two more." Ron insisted, surprisingly clear. "Two more."

"You've had thirteen."

"Juss... Two more. There others... lots o' others, but I juss need two." Ron explained. "There the moss 'mpotent."

Traux folded. Sitting down beside Antea whose face was a bright pink hue from a combination of alcohol and a sniffing nose.

---

9 days ago (Evening)

Hermione twirled lightly in front of the mirror. The beautiful cobalt blue silk catching air and forming a perfect circle as she moved. The white design of lilies spreading across her stomach was simple yet eye catching. It gave her just enough lift for her chest for her figure to really show, but still keep her modesty intact.

All the girls had decided to wear something nice for Christmas day.

"Ron vill be most pleased I zink," Fleur announced proudly as she stood behind her.

"And most disappointed when I tell him he's not allowed to have. He can't treat his family and us like that and expect to walk through the door expecting hugs and kisses," Hermione sniffed in irritation.

Fleur simply looked amused at this declaration.

"If zat is your aim then I zink I 'ave the perfect night clothes for you. He will be very... flustered," Fleur smirked.

"I think the Weasley's have officially corrupted you," Hermione announced with a grin.

"You should know zetter than anyone that it is impozible to not have your morals destroyed by zee family," Fleur told her with a conspiratorially twinkle in her eye.

"I'll have them washed before I give them back," Hermione promised.

"No need to wash zem if nozing is going to 'appen," Fleur called as she left the room to grab them.

Hermione laughed, surprised by the bluntness of the French woman.

"Tout est juste dans l'amour et la guerre," Fleur murmured coming back into the room. "Le moldus peuvent etre tres intelligent."

---

"Fred. I misssss you. Every... one missus you sooo sooo mud... much." Ron slurred, blinking rapidly in an attempt to clear his mind. Hot tears continued to roll down Ron's face, but he didn't notice. " 'M sorry if I vass an awful bwother. I 'ope I wasn.' I... Gredge nees you and I nees you too. I can't... do this 'lone. I love you." Ron announced, holding up his glass and shooting it back.

Traux filled up his shot glass one more time.

"It's time to say goodbye Ron." Traux told him softly, but firmly.

Ron nodded a little too vigorously and held up the shot.

---

Eight days ago

Ron couldn't breathe.

It felt like someone had ripped his throat out from the rest of his body and just walked away. He'd been struggling to walk for two weeks in rehabilitation, but now his body was propelled forward as if it was a force of its own. A chair was knocked over. A woman let out a shriek of surprise. People shouted behind him. His side slammed into a counter and he was vaguely aware that it hurt badly. Someone was pushed to the side.

Had he done that?

Slamming into a door Ron entered a room to see a half dozen mediwizards surrounding a small body in a medical bed. Their wands were raised and a loud chanting filled the air. Mary Salen stood beside the bed holding Rose's hand while a mediwitch attempted to convince her to leave the room. Behind him hands grabbed to pull him out of the room, but he wouldn't let them. Like a man possessed he moved to the other side of the bed.

"Mummy I'm scared," Rose choked out between wheezing breaths.

"Just look at me sweetie. Don't look down. Just keep your eyes focused on me," Mary demanded, panic evident in her voice.

Ron shook uncontrollably as the mediwizard's wands all glowed red. Rose's chest was frighteningly still. It wasn't moving up and down like it was supposed to, but Rose was conscious. There was a line of magic around her throat and mouth that Ron knew was breathing for her. He suddenly felt large arms grabbing him around the waist and hauling him out of the room. Rose's eyes never left her mother. The wand tips seemed to glow brighter as the doors before him swung closed.

"No, no, no, no..." Ron rasped shaking his head rapidly in denial.

The large mediwizard that had pulled him from the room was telling him something, but he couldn't hear.

"I'm the one that's supposed to die. Not her... she's better. She only needs one more treatment. She's better!" Ron screamed.

The mediwizard was in front of him now. Large hands on his shoulder's as he stared sadly at him.

"She's gonna be fine," Ron snapped.

"Her lungs have stopped working. They're trying everything, but her lungs haven't been taking in air for thirty minutes now. Even with the

aided magical breathing her body can only last another fifteen minutes more at most." The mediwizard explained softly.

"She's ten." Ron rasped brokenly.

"I know."

"She's just a little girl." Ron insisted.

"I know."

"She can't die." Ron growled, pushing at the healer weakly.

"You know better than that Ron." The healer said quietly.

Looking closer at the man he'd been yelling at he realized it was one of the healers working on his case. Doctor Jimson, who'd been working by his side for his rehabilitation to walk, was a man much taller and broader than himself. Ron suspected the man had giant's blood in him, but didn't broach the topic knowing how sensitive Hagrid and Olympe were about the subject. He hadn't even noticed he'd been talking to someone he knew.

Ron shook his head in denial.

"I'll take her place... there's a spell right? One person can transfer damage to another. I'll take her place." Ron demanded.

"Do you honestly believe that her mother wouldn't have taken her place if it was possible?" Jimson asked sternly.

"No! It is possible! Hermione told me there's a spell to take someone's place!" Ron snarled, ignoring the fact that Jimson would have no clue who Hermione was.

Jimson looked at him steadily.

"It takes months of preparation. The person has to be the exact height, weight, gender, race and body type of the person it's being



transferred to. Not only that, there's only been a few successful attempts since the ritual spell was created,' Jimson explained sadly.

"Let me see her," Ron insisted, voice cracking.

"It's not your place. She deserves to go peacefully in the arms of her mother," Jimson patiently explained.

"She's not gonna die. You can't give up on her yet. She's still with us," Ron argued quietly.

His body was catching up to him. He felt his knees giving out, but Jimson wouldn't let him fall. His big arms held him and gently brought him to the ground with him. Ron continued shaking his head at the man, for all the good it did, his mouth opening and closing.

"She's getting better. She only needs *one* more treatment." Ron repeated uselessly.

A heart wrenching wail filled the hospital wing. Ron's head snapped up to Rose's door. Everywhere people stopped what they were doing to peer into the room not ten feet in front of Ron. Shamelessly using Jimson's shoulders to pull himself up Ron stumbled towards the sound of Mary Salen's sobs.

"Dormio." Jimson whispered.

Half turning Ron stared in shock as his world started to go black.

"You bas..."

Jimson caught the redhead in his arms as blue eyes rolled into the back of their head. The man pulled Ron's chest to him and placed his arm under Ron's legs. Picking the boy up all the way Jimson peered into the child's room to see the mother sobbing over the dead body of her little girl.

"Sometimes... these things just happen and there's nothing you can do about it." Jimson told the unconscious teen in his arms.

---

"Rose wanted to call me dad," Ron confessed to the two with surprising clarity, choking back a sob, and raised the shot glass before him. "I didn't... get ta tells her it was 'kay. I wan'net to though."

"Tell her now," Antea snapped loudly.

She held her forgotten shot glass before her up in the air.

"Tell her now and she'll hear you. I promise."

"Rose," Ron began softly, "you can alfays... calls me daddy. I would... 'ove for youse to call me that forever... and... and... I want you to know I sink of you all... all the zime. I miss you."

Ron stared down at the last shot of vodka. Unlike the other's he held this one to his lip for a long moment before slowly shooting it back. Gently putting it onto the table Ron folded his arms and buried his face in them. His shoulders shook and when the sound of quiet sobbing filled the room Antea simply moved beside him and rubbed his back. Traux left the table to pay the tab.

He'd make sure Ron didn't go back to the hospital until he needed his next treatment the day after tomorrow.

---

12 hours ago

His mother was sobbing. Percy was cringing. Ron was going to die.

George was going to kill him.

Everyone had managed to come for the holiday break. Everyone. That rarely ever happened. Ron had told their mother that he would try to get off for the holiday, but George knew the little prat was avoiding their mother in the same way he avoided Harry and Hermione. He wasn't going to stand for this any longer. He'd been aware that Ron had duped him by angering him with Fred, but

knowing that Ron had been willing to go that far had made him even more furious with his younger brother for a while afterwards. It didn't matter what Ron's reasons were.

Now though... his mother was sitting in the kitchen with a letter in front of her in Ron's handwriting. The little shit hadn't even tried to make an excuse this time. The letter simply said: *I'm not coming*.

He hadn't gotten a letter from Ron in weeks, neither had their parents or Harry and Hermione, and *this* was the first thing they'd gotten. Even when they were arguing back and forth Ron still sent back letters each week even if it was just angry scrawls. He couldn't believe that Ron would pull something like this eight days before Christmas. It all felt like the Percy incident all over again. Ron had waited until the last possible moment to tell their mother he wasn't coming.

In the corner of the room Bill and Harry were talking back and forth furiously with each other, a baby Teddy looking tearful in Harry's arms. Hermione was sitting dejectedly on the couch beside Fleur while Ginny paced back and forth in fury. Arthur was in the kitchen attempting to soothe his wife while Percy stood awkwardly as far away from everyone as possible with an expression that clearly said he'd rather not touch this with a sixty foot pole. Charlie hadn't arrived yet. He was still Christmas shopping in Diagon Alley. He didn't know yet.

George's fist clenched as he looked around the room at all the faces of his family. They didn't need this now. Not after everything they'd been through.

Ron needed to get his head out of his ass and he was just the man to do it.

He already had clothes packed. He'd been planning on spending his whole four days off here. Grabbing his coat and pulling it on George took a deep breath.

"I'm dragging Ron here whether he likes it or not," George announced.

The room erupted in voices of agreement and protests.

"I agree. Ron should be 'ere," Fleur nodded, voice stern.

"If Ron wants to stay in Australia alone for Christmas and be a prat then let him," Ginny snapped.

"And if George wants to drink himself to death with self-pity let him," George snapped back.

The room went deathly silent.

"I'm going to get him whether he likes it or not," George repeated.

"I'm coming too!" Harry announced.

"No, Harry, you need to take care of Teddy. He's your responsibility and I need to have a long talk with him anyway," George told him firmly.

"We ALL need to have a long talk with him George," Hermione seethed.

Her eyes were puffy and red, but glittering with anger.

"We ALL can't take a trip to Australia though. I can't handle paying for all of you. Besides I don't think that bombarding him with lectures would do much good," George explained, eyeing Hermione.

"Besides I hear you've been sending him lectures for months now."

Hermione had the decency to blush.

"Hermione... can I take Pig with me? It will be easier to track Ron down with his bird," George asked.

Hermione nodded.

"He's with Dobby, back at our place. I'll pop over and get him," Hermione said softly.

She grabbed a handful of powder and threw it into the fire.

"Apartment 9 in McIntosh Border Complex."

So focused on Hermione was he that George didn't notice Bill whispering with Harry again. It wasn't until Hermione had been gone for a few minutes that Bill stepped towards him.

"That's fine. I agree with you George," Bill called out, "but I also think you need at least one other person with you to mediate. I'm going. Just the two of us. No one else."

The house settled down.

Molly had stopped crying and was now staring at George with wide, searching eyes.

"You can't force him to do something just because you want him to honey," Molly said softly. "None of my babies are prone to listening to what their told."

Bill walked into the kitchen and clamped a hand onto his mother's shoulder.

"Sure we do mum... eventually," Bill told her.

He kissed her forehead before backing out of the kitchen and grabbing his own backpack. George walked into the kitchen next, gently gripping each side of his mother's face, and bending down to eyelevel.

"We'll be back soon with Ron," George told her, leaning forward and kissing her forehead as well.

Walking into the living room George caught Bill giving Fleur a soft goodbye kiss. Hermione stepped through the fire with a hyperactive

bird buzzing around in his cage. The tiny creature twitted excitedly at all of them. Ron loved that stupid bird.

George had always thought it was funny how Ron would scold the thing before feeding it an owl treat when he thought no one was looking.

Hermione stepped forward and hugged George.

"When you bring him back I get him first," she warned, giving George a tight squeeze.

"I still got medicine for my ear left over after you're through with him that he can have," George teased lightly as he took the cage from her.

"Don't be too rough," Harry insisted, but they both knew it was for not.

Teddy looked much happier now that everyone was in better spirits. His hair had turned from black to bright pink. George bent forward and lightly gripped the infants nose.

"Don't worry so much, we'll bring him back in one piece," George said in a happy voice towards Harry and the baby.

His eyes were sharp and angry though.

"Let's go," Bill called from the door.

The two brothers exited the Burrow.

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Three hours ago

Traux strolled into the darkened room and switched the light on. The figure in the bed growled angrily. Bloodshot eyes glared at him. He paid them no mind though. Striding over to the bed he ripped the blankets off and threw them to the floor.

"What the fuck?" Ron hissed angrily.

"Get up. I'm taking you out of here for tonight," Traux stated simply.

"I'm not going anywhere," Ron snapped.

The redhead stepped off the bed scrambling for the blankets on the floor. Traux leaned down and forced Ron back up to his feet. The redhead shoved him away before unbalancing himself and sitting heavily over the arm of one of the visitor chairs. Glaring Ron moved to go to the bathroom, probably to lock him-self in there. Traux blocked his way.

"Move," Ron rasped.

"I know you're hurting. I know you're not really ready to go out, but I've only got tonight and I'll be damned if I leave you like this without doing something," Traux told Ron steadily.

Ron's eyes turned hard.

"You don't know what I'm feeling. Get out of my way," Ron whispered quietly.

"Antea tells me you've barely eaten anything since she died. That was eight days ago. You've held yourself up in this room and only come out for her funeral. You're a complete wreck and need to get out of this place," Traux said tiredly.

"I don't feel like going out," Ron told him venomously.

"So you're fine being sixty feet from the place she died?" Traux asked incredulously.

"It's a hospital. People die all the time here," Ron snapped, giving him a resentful look.

"You waiting to die too? Or are you trying to die?" Traux said darkly.  
"Cause you're sure as hell doing a good job of it. Not eating and

being so difficult with all the healers."

At Ron's surprised look Traux laughed humorlessly.

"I've only been gone a few weeks Ron. The healers didn't suddenly undergo an oblivious charm and forget I come to visit you all the time. They practically begged me to do something when I walked through the doors. If Antea hadn't warned me ahead of time I would have had a panic attack I'm sure," Traux explained dryly.

"I'm not trying to be difficult," Ron defended him-self halfheartedly.

"You've just given up is all, right?" Traux asked, sitting on the bed across from Ron who righted himself in the visitor's chair.

Bloodshot blue eyes with blackish blue bruises beneath them stared at him listlessly. Ron pulled one knee onto the chair and buried his face in the soft sweat pants he wore.

"I'm just so tired. The wars supposed to be over and I still keep losing people," Ron choked out. "I'm tired of being so bloody sick all the time with no relief. I want to sleep without seeing dead bodies and family members begging me for help. I just... I don't want to be here anymore."

Traux breathed in sharply.

"You want to... die?" Traux asked, stricken. Another part of him noted that this was the first time Ron had ever mentioned anything to do about the war to him. Antea and him had avoided touching on the subject as if it were the black plague.

Ron stared at him blankly for a second before something clicked.

"No... no, I don't *want* to die. Sometimes I do... in the middle of... no I don't want to die. I just don't want to live like this," Ron stated, gesturing his hand towards the room.

"In the hospital," Traux clarified.



Ron nodded as he brought his other knee up.

"Every time I hear footsteps I look up waiting for Rose to walk into the room," Ron admitted.

"So you do have a problem with being here all the time?" Traux asked gently, leaning down so that he could look Ron in the eyes.

Ron turned away from him then, staring at the wall.

"I'm serious about not wanting to go out," Ron insisted tiredly.

"I know you don't want to go out, but I think you *need* to go out," Traux urged. "You need to get away from this for a bit. Come with me and Antea for tonight, get drunk off your sorry ass, and have a little fun."

"I just got the strength back to walk again and you want me to get tipsy? The floor hasn't even had time to miss me."

"Come on. Antea's waiting for us."

---

Present

"I 'ink 'm gonna be sick," Ron muttered.

Traux pulled Ron's arm over his shoulder while Antea stumbled to her feet. She was drunk, but nowhere near as bad as the redhead.

"Do you feel better at least?" Traux asked.

Ron's head leaned heavily against Traux's shoulder awkwardly since the brunet was so much shorter than the tall teen. Ron seemed to be considering the question as they walked out the door of the restaurant.

"Yeah..." Ron managed.

"I don't know abou' better, but I feel like this giant hand that was squeezing me heart finally let go," Antea said, breathing in deeply.

"Tha's deep," Ron slurred.

Antea laughed.

"It was a bit o' the dramatics, yeah?" Antea asked, but Traux could see the seriousness there.

"Yeah," Ron agreed, shaking his head a bit too vigorously.

The redhead put a hand to his mouth. Traux grimaced.

"Please don't vomit on me," Traux pleaded.

"Tol' you game was ba'id..." Ron mumbled.

"It was a good idea," Antea insisted, a little too loudly.

He'd almost forgotten that Antea was drunk too. She was just better at holding her liquor. Guess one stereotype concerning the Irish was true.

"Meant nozin by it Ant," Ron mumbled.

Traux snickered.

"I like that nickname," Traux declared, glancing at Antea who pouted.

"Well I don't. Antea is already short for somethin.' No need to make it shorter," Antea spoke slowly, as if she wasn't sure she was talking correctly.

"What's it short for?" Traux couldn't help, but ask.

"Me parents thought they were clever naming me Anastacia," Antea explained, making a face. "Never introduced meself by tha' in me whole life. I'd rather suck on a cock."

Traux scrunched up his nose.

"Too much detail thanks, but Anastacia is rather nice," Traux told her sincerely.

"'Rown noser," Ron mumbled, snickering.

"And what is your inuber... inuberuuu... drunk opinion boyo?" Antea asked, clearly amused.

"Is okay," Ron slurred, making a so-so gesture with his hand.

That's when a tiny minute owl landed on Ron's outstretched hand and hooted up happily at him.

Ron blinked blankly at the tiny creature for several long seconds.

"Thas not good," Ron muttered.

Traux cringed, looking at the creature for the very familiar red envelope, but it wasn't there.

"You slimy, hypocritical little shit," A voice yelled furiously.

"Ohhhh... thas really nut good," Ron slurred.

"Whose there?" Traux shouted, standing in front of Ron and Antea.

Antea grabbed ahold of Ron, but since she'd had too many drinks as well they wavered on their feet.

Two redheaded men approached. One had long hair tied back with scars across his face and a lithe, tall body. The other was younger with a missing left ear, a look of fury on his face, brown eyes trying to burn a hole through him.

"A bar?" The angry man screamed, pointing behind them at the restaurant they'd just exited.

"You wrote to tell *me* that alcohol wouldn't solve my problems and here you are being carried out of a bar?" The man screamed incredulously.

"I think you should tell us who you are," Traux demanded.

He mentally cursed. Ron and Antea hadn't been the only ones to drink tonight. He wasn't nearly as clear minded as he should be for an altercation. He certainly wouldn't be able to handle a fight with someone sober.

"These you're drinking buddies Ron?" The angry man screamed as he approached. "You get together and get wasted a lot?"

Traux glanced back at Ron. The teen had pulled his hoodie over his head, hiding the sunken in cheeks and dark eyes.

"George," Ron rasped, "um... just liste' kay."

"Your brother George?" Traux asked, partly relieved and partly confused.

Ron nodded, but at the fast motion he covered his mouth again.

If *he* wasn't thinking clearly Ron certainly wasn't.

"George! If he's truly drunk there's no use talking to him right now," Bill told George tiredly.

"We don't need to talk," George hissed, "I'm gonna beat the crap out of him."

"Hey now!" Antea shouted.

"There's no need to do that. I swear this is the first time he's drank since he's moved here," Traux promised.

"Shut up!" George roared, pulling out his wand. "Why the bloody hell would I believe his drinking buddies huh?"

"He's got a fair point there, don't he?" Antea muttered, cheeks still very pink from the alcohol.

"Move aside, Ron's coming with us!" George yelled.

Crap!

He did not have the capacity to perform a spell right now.

"I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I can't let you do that,"

They didn't know. He couldn't allow them to take Ron as long as they didn't know. They could unintentionally kill him. Clearly if 'George' decided to go through with his threat Ron would be in deep shit. He couldn't take that kind of treatment. Not being so sick. Neither could he trust himself to perform a spell right now though. If he could just calm them down and explain.

"You can't let me do that?" George asked, eyes sharp with anger, voice humorless. "What are you, his bodyguard?"

"Listen, you don't understand the situation," Antea snapped.

"I think we understand the situation much better than you do," the long haired one spoke up again.

"What? Did Ickle Ronniekins whine to you about the war? Did he tell you how hard it was on him?" George taunted.

"George..." the long haired one warned.

"No! Look at him Bill! He's hiding behind this guy completely wasted! He's not even *trying* to defend himself!" George yelled.

At that exact moment Ron pulled away from Antea and stumbled to the side of the road, vomiting alcohol and bile onto a pile of bushes.

"Fantastic," Bill muttered, disgusted.

Traux blocked George's path when he tried to get ahold of Ron.

"Just listen! You really don't know the situation. Ron is really..."

"Confudus!" George snapped.

The spell hit Traux straight in the face.

"What you do that for ya feckin' prick!" Antea snapped, pulling out her wand.

"Expelliarmus!" Bill yelled out automatically. "George! He gave you no reason to attack him like that! And you are clearly too intoxicated to be using your wand." Bill directed the last comment to the young woman scrambling around for her wand.

The sound of Ron retching continued in the background.

"Well I wouldn't ta reached for it if ye wouldn't 'ave attacked me friend ya yellow bellied prats," Antea snapped. "Look at 'im he's staring off into space he is! Just because your throwing a temper tantrum."

"We're taking *our* brother and getting out of here!" George snapped.

Ron had finally stopped vomiting and was shaking his hooded head vigorously.

"Thas not a good..." Ron started, but George pulled him up roughly from the ground.

"Hey," Antea yelled, moving forward.

Bill stepped in front of her.

"George!" Bill snapped. "I know your angry, but loosen your grip."

George stepped back with Ron, disappearing on the spot.

"Shite, no!" Antea said in shock and anger. "He's sick! For the love of Merlin bring 'im back! Don't hurt 'im."

Bill hesitated for a moment before backing away from her.

"We wouldn't hurt him. George is just angry. If he's got a cold or something then you shouldn't have brought him out here in the first place, but we'll take care of it," Bill said softly.

"Ye don't under..." Antea started.

But Bill had already disappeared as well.

## Part 3: The Secret

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

A/N: Sorry guys, had to have my computer wiped. It took a while to get all my documents back onto my laptop. I'm in the middle of moving right now. I'm going to be staying in a hotel like place meant for temporary living for a few months while the contract for the house goes through. I'd expect the next chapter mid-September. I like the new scenes that come with living military, but the act of moving is such a pain.

I believe that you guys are starting to see a pattern to my chapters, right?

"With a Secret like that, at some point the secret itself becomes irrelevant.

The fact that you kept it does not."

-Sara Gruen, Water for Elephants

### Part 3: The Secret

George paced the confines of the house. He'd been pacing it for nearly three hours now because three hours ago they'd walked into the house with an unconscious Ron between them. Bill had banned him from the living room where Ron lay sleeping.

Bill had a point.

Really... he did.

They wouldn't be able to get anything out of him until Ron was sober.

That did not stop George from furiously pacing through the kitchen and hallway.



While waiting for the man George had hired to prep the port key back at the international travel center Bill had sat Ron down on a bench. George had gone at him the moment Bill stepped away to get them water. He'd mumbled something about Ron needing to be rehydrated. So George screamed. Ranting and raving about anything and everything under the sun he was angry about. Ron had sat quietly bent forward, swaying from side to side, keeping his hoodie pulled as far over his face as the cloth would go. Ron's refusal to look at him had only furthered his anger.

Looking back on the moment when he furiously ripped the hoodie off it wasn't like people said. Time didn't slow down in his shocked horror. The hoodie didn't take forever to come off, it took seconds, even with Ron pulling to keep it on. George vaguely remembered stepping back startled.

"Iz no' what you 'ink," Ron slurred desperately.

Dark black and blue bruises lay under Ron's gaunt face. Ron attempted to stand, but couldn't. Ron shook his head slowly, his eyes frantic but hazy with alcohol.

"Firz time. I've neve'done it!" Ron rasped pleadingly.

"Never done it?!" George hissed incredulously, kneeling down in front of Ron. George grabbed the front of Ron's hoodie and began to unzip it. Ron weakly pushed George away, but the stronger redhead simply batted Ron's trembling hands away.

"Don' do it!" Ron slurred, yanking at George's hands, but tipping to the side dangerously. George snorted in disgust as he pushed Ron upright and finished unzipping the bulky jacket. Ripping it open George stared quietly. The shirt underneath was slipping off of far too thin shoulders. Reaching forward George almost gently touched his brother's chest and moved down to feel very distinct ribs.

"What have you done to yourself?" George asked, horrified.

"Geose... 'M gonna be sick," Ron warned softly.

George stepped back just in time for Ron to vomit onto the floor in front of him. The elder red head performed a cleaning spell without even thinking, still staring at Ron with the jacket wide open. Ron pulled it closed self-consciously, looking determinedly at the floor.

That's when it happened. Ron tipped forward, passing out. George easily caught him in his arms, feeling the sharp angles of bones against his chest. The body in his arms felt impossible light. George maneuvered around almost mechanically, trying not to allow the body's story to reveal too much. He wasn't quite ready to know. Pulling Ron back onto the bench beside him George absently dragged his fingers through his brother's hair.

Bottled water was shoved into his hand. Looking up George saw Bill looking at him questioningly. He hadn't realized it, but he'd leaned forward, unconsciously hiding Ron's face from passer byes. George looked away, silently pulling open Ron's jacket open and leaning back so Bill could see.

"No..." Bill whispered.

"Yeah," George replied dejectedly.

"Did he say..." Bill trailed off.

"He denied it," George answered half angrily, half hopelessly.

"Let's get going," Bill mumbled, sounding far older than he actual was.

So he had to wait.

Bill had begged him to get some sleep, but how could he?

He felt so charged with anger and... hurt.

Fleur had already been fast asleep when they came to shell cottage. It had been agreed that they would not bring Ron back to the Burrow like this. It would already be devastating enough when they saw him. Bill claimed that Ron deserved at least a chance to explain. George didn't agree. He wanted to throw Ron under the night bus and watch him get chewed out. The hypocrite.

Bill had stood his ground though. Doing such a thing to Ron might make George feel happy for a little bit, but he'd regret it when he cooled down. Bringing a drunk Ron home during Christmas break and announcing that he'd become an alcoholic in his absence would just hurt everyone and wouldn't teach Ron a lesson.

If he was honest with himself he felt betrayed.

He felt cheated.

Ron had kept him going when Fred died. Somehow Ron seemed to always know exactly what to say when George needed to hear it. Percy tried in his own clumsy way to help, but there was a reason everyone fondly called the be-speckled Weasley socially awkward. Percy always tended to say the wrong thing at just the right time.

He'd been coping so well. The nightmares were still horrible. Waking up in his flat alone and realizing why he was alone was still devastating. Working in the shop by himself was still unbearably lonesome. His slip ups in reference to himself rather than we were still frequent.

It wasn't that. He was still far from recovered or well.

He wasn't well.

But he was coping well.

After a nightmare there was usually at least one letter from Percy or Ron. When he woke up alone and had a hard night Lee tended to be waiting for him in the morning as if he'd sensed it. Harry and

Hermione visited him often at the shop or ate lunch with him. When he messed up because Fred wasn't there nobody gave him a hard time. It was still awkward and tense since Ron wasn't there, but he got by.

His long talks with Ron during the summer hadn't ceased simply because Ron was training on another continent. Their letters back and forth were always long. It was comforting. Ron never sugar coated things like the others. It was a trait he shared with Fred. *That* was beyond consoling. George wasn't sure where Fred and Ron got it from. Neither of their parents possessed such straightforward and blunt natures. Now that Fred was gone it was something that George had latched onto.

The thought that Ron had lied to him bothered him more than he cared to admit, even to himself.

He'd come to rely on Ron to tell him like it was.

To find out that Ron hadn't been coping at all was like a punch to the gut.

It felt like he couldn't breathe.

George marched into the living room, staring at Ron's bruised, gaunt face, before falling into the armchair beside the couch. Ron's face was etched in discomfort. The teenager twisted under the blanket Bill covered him with and moaned quietly. Ron seemed to be having a nightmare.

George finally felt his eyelids drooping. He'd pay for it tomorrow with sore muscles, but he'd know the moment Ron woke up. He curled himself on the loveseat and laid his head against the arm of the chair.

He'd talk to Ron the moment he woke up.

# Confrontations Ch 11

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

**Now usually when one of my characters is having a dream I put it in italics to indicate that... but since the dream comes RIGHT after the flashback I decided to leave it with regular type because it seemed like I was going into another flashback.**

---

**Unremarkableness is a word I invented. I claim all rights to this word. If anyone wants to use this word explicit permission must be attained from me.**

**Unremarkableness: To be particularly lacking in anything unique or distinctive to one's character or skills.**

**Ron Weasley... as the first person to use this word, is a co-owner of this word. He possesses special rights to use this word whenever he sees fit.**

**That is all.**

---

"And when at last you find someone to whom you feel you can pour out your soul, you stop in shock at the words you utter- they are so rusty, so ugly, so meaningless and feeble from being kept in the small cramped dark inside you so long."

- Sylvia Plath, *The Unabridged Journals of Sylvia Plath*

Chapter 11: Confrontations

*Walking into the office of Professor McGonagall felt similar to wading through a swamp. The air was tense and thick with anger that caused Ron's body to stiffen as he lowered himself into the chair in*

*front of her desk. McGonagall gave him a strained smile as Ron tried desperately to ignore the eyes trying to burn a hole through his head.*

*Umbridge. The pink toad was sitting in on the four head houses career advice sessions for fifth years. Harry had already warned him about the horror that was his session. His only comfort was that Ron knew Umbridge didn't have a bone to pick with him. He made sure to arrive on time and despite the fact that he was Harry's best friend the toad hadn't so much as glanced at him since the beginning of term. Never was he more thankful for his unremarkableness.*

*" Mr. Weasley," McGonagall acknowledged with a nod of her head, "thank you for being so prompt. Today we are going to discuss what you have planned for your future career ideas. I'll help you decide which classes are best for your upcoming sixth and seventh year studies."*

*Ron cringed. The transfiguration teacher's voice was very clip which meant that it was most likely that Umbridge had already upset her several times that morning. Ron nodded his head to show her he understood while trying very hard not to look back at the woman scribbling notes.*

*" So what do you plan to do when you leave Hogwarts Mr. Weasley?" McGonagall questioned softly.*

*" Working in a charms shop maybe? I'm pretty good at charms," Ron supplied uncertainly.*

*McGonagall seemed taken aback.*

*" Are you not sure what you would like to do with your life?" McGonagall asked.*

*" I'd like to work somewhere that works with charms, because that's what I'm good at," Ron repeated carefully.*

*There was a loud cough from behind them. Ron cringed while McGonagall scowled.*

*"What could you possibly have to say?" McGonagall snapped.*

*"No need to be so rude Minerva. I just find it strange. Potter thinks he's going to be an Auror and Granger wants to work in the ministry to help 'change' things for... creatures." Umbridge's high pitched voice spoke mockingly. "Yet you want to work in a charms shop? Clearly you have a much better grasp of your limitations."*

*McGonagall's scowl deepened while Ron's ears burned with anger and humiliation.*

*"Harry and Hermione are brilliant. They're the most talented students Hogwarts will ever see," Ron snapped. "They can do whatever they want."*

*Far from deterred Umbridge's wide face smiled sickeningly sweet at him.*

*"But not you?" She questioned.*

*"I have had Mr. Weasley in my class for a number of years and he is a very capable student," McGonagall practically growled.*

*Ron nearly snorted at that, but kept himself in check. McGonagall must really hate Umbridge to be blatantly lying like that.*

*"Now Minerva... It wasn't I who suggested he wasn't capable. He didn't either. He simply suggested that he wasn't brilliant. You're the one whose questioning his... capableness as a student since neither of us brought it up," Umbridge said with a slimy smile. Her beady eyes fell on Ron. "Working at a shop sounds like a marvelous job. A very average, normal job to aspire for by a capable and average student."*

*Ron felt his lip curl and the red spread down to his cheeks. He glowered at her from his seat. All he'd wanted to do was come in and cause as little trouble as possible.*

*" If Ronald Weasley works at a shop it is only because he so chooses. Now Mr. Weasley you will need an Exceeds Expectations in Charms for this 'career,'" McGonagall stated, emphasizing the words career as she glared at Umbridge. Ron rectified his last statement. McGonagall did not hate Umbridge, she absolutely loathed her. "I suggest you take transfiguration which is heavily needed in shops, potions as well as defense against the dark arts."*

*There was another cough.*

*" Why do I need potions?" Ron asked, surprised.*

*McGonagall was about to speak when Umbridge interrupted again.*

*" Ahem! Yes why does he need potions and defense against the dark arts? There is no need for either of them. It sounds as if you are pushing him towards the same thing Potter wanted," Umbridge asked, brittle like.*

*" It should be obvious why I need defense against the dark arts considering everything," Ron blurted out.*

*" I beg your pardon?" Umbridge asked, her voice dropping ten degrees at the same time that McGonagall smirk widened from her position.*

*" Since You-Know-Who is back of course. Everyone needs it," Ron said evenly, silently praying that he wasn't digging himself into a hole.*

*" Are you suggesting..." Umbridge began, but Ron turned back to McGonagall who was smiling at him.*



*" Why potions though?" Ron asked, interrupting the woman behind him.*

*There was an outraged, strangled shriek.*

*" Potions is something that is sold in many charm shops. Departments that work with charms often come across potions that work with charms. Careers often combine the specific curriculum we teach here Mr. Weasley, which is handled during your career training after you leave us," McGonagall explained.*

*" I can try my best, but I don't think it'll be happening professor," Ron told her honestly.*

*" I trust you have the study sheet Miss. Granger drew up for you and Mr. Potter?" McGonagall asked with lips twitching.*

*" Of course," Ron said, suddenly smiling as well.*

*" Follow that and I'm sure that you'll do just fine," McGonagall told him, "that should be all."*

*" Thank you Professor."*

*Ron got up and left his headmistresses office feeling much more dejected than when he went in.*

*He was not telling Harry or Hermione about this.*

*It was halfway to the common room when he heard the sound of footsteps rapidly following him. Pleading for mercy Ron took a chance to glance back, fearful of seeing a large pink thing following him. Instead he found himself looking at McGongall.*

*" Would you mind if I asked you a personal question Mr. Weasley?" McGonagall asked.*

*Startled beyond measure Ron simply nodded.*

*" Why sell yourself short? You're a very clever young man Mr. Weasley and you could go far if you just put some effort into your studies."*

*" There's nothing wrong with being average you know? You think I have potential because everyone in my family is extraordinary so I have to have something special somewhere right? But I'm not and I'm perfectly fine with being average. I just wish everyone else could be okay with that too," Ron said tiredly.*

*Then McGonagall got that look about her.*

*He was tired of everyone having that searching look about them; that look of puzzlement when they tried to figure out why Harry Potter and Hermione Granger were his best friends. Harry Potter the most talented student of their age. Hermione Granger the most brilliant witch of their age.*

*And then him...*

*He was tired of hearing Gryffendors asking that question to each other as he passed them in the hall. He was tired of hearing Fred and George making that joke late nights at the Burrow. He was tired of remembering Rita Skeeter demanding him that question in fourth year. He was tired of seeing that question in Ginny and mum's eyes. He was just tired.*

*He didn't want to be captain of the quidditch team anymore. He didn't want to be head boy or even a prefect. He didn't care anymore. Yes. It would be amazing to be an Auror, but realistically speaking it really wasn't within his reach.*

*He was tired. He would follow Harry and Hermione and just be content with wherever he ended up. Working at a Charms shop sounded nice because even though it wasn't what he wanted it was something that he could say he earned. He wouldn't have to try for an Aurorship and see the disappointment on people's faces when he*

*didn't make it. He wouldn't have people staring at him all day long and hear them whispering that question.*

*" Mr. Weasley... You're adherence to being anything, but ordinary astounds me. Most students do everything in their power to prove that they are extraordinary."*

*" I'm not Harry Potter. He's just my best friend," Ron insisted.*

*" Indeed. One of these days Ronald, you'll figure out exactly why that very line means the world to Mr. Potter. Until you figure it out I suggest you just try your best," McGonagall told him firmly.*

*With that she walked away.*

---

His knees bumped into something again. Rubbing them furiously Ron swung his head blindly to the side to glare in annoyance at the giggling pair.

"We're almost there Ron don't worry," Mary announced.

"Worried? I was never worried. I was confused. NOW I'm worried because you told me I shouldn't be which means that I really *need* to be," Ron rasped.

The sound of metal clanking against metal sounded and joy filled screams filled the air. It sort of sounded like a quidditch match.

"Step right up folks! Take a ride on the zipper!" The sound of a man's voice echoed, growing louder.

A tiny hand was leading him blindfolded while a large, gentle one guided him from behind.

"I'm not getting inside a bug," Ron rasped warningly.

"Don't worry it's not a bug!" Rose chirped brightly.

The hand left him.

"Take a step up Ron and bend down far so you don't hit your head," Mary instructed.

Ron reached out with his hands and felt the top. Stepping inside Ron carefully sat down next to the giggling child.

"Can I take it off now?" Ron asked, bemusedly.

"Not quite yet Ron," Mary told him, laughter in her voice.

Something closed them inside. Ron felt his breath hitch in fright. Feeling out in front of him Ron felt metal fence like material in front of him.

He couldn't go back. No... no, no, no, no, no.

Ron tore the blindfold off looking around in fear. His breath came out in shallow rasping gasps.

No, no, no, no, no.

He was in a cage.

He and Rose had been locked inside a cage.

His wand was in his hand in less than a second. He only had time to turn towards the lock in mind blowing terror when the entire thing started to *move* . Rose's giggles filled the air as it lurched forward.

Why was the cage moving?

Confusion and horror consumed him.

Ron's breath hitched. It started to gain momentum, moving faster and faster until suddenly they flipped upside down. It wasn't like being on a broom where you had *control* . Rose wasn't giggling anymore either. The thing dropped again. The rusted metal keeping

them in the air was *creaking* and *groaning*. The joy filled screams outside the thing had stopped and instead all he could hear was the sound of people dying. They were in agony and there was blood *everywhere* .

Ron reached for Rose's hand, but when he gripped it something felt wrong. Fighting against the pressure, terror, and nausea overwhelming him Ron looked over. He screamed. Rose's front was torn open and her lungs exposed. Ron moved forward trying to push the flesh together again, but she was gone, her eyes staring at him blankly.

Ron pulled his hands back choking as blood and other things dripped down from them. He backed up only to feel the metal of the cage. Looking around desperately for his wand Ron couldn't find it. Ron banged and kicked at the metal in panic when a voice sounded that chilled him to the bone.

"If it isn't the blood traitor all wrapped up nice just for me," a voice mumbled silkily.

Kneeling on the top of the cage staring down at him like he was an animal was a large burly man with shoulder length greasy hair a smell befitting an Ogre. Ron let go of the cage, allowing gravity to pull him down and in effect, as far from Ray Spinsor as possible. The man was defying gravity and momentum itself as his beady eyes peered at him in hatred. Water began to drip around them. Ron felt it sliding down across his body and saw it floating in the air around them as the thing reached its peak and dropped again, Spinsor's cackle of joy ringing in his ears.

No, no, no, no, no... he wasn't there. He wasn't there. He got away. He wasn't inside a prison cell. Rose was okay.

No she wasn't.

"I really 'ought to pay you back for what you did brat. Finish what we started right?" Spinsor asked cheerfully.

The thing continued to whirl around. His body and that of Rose's was flung to the side. Blood hit his face, but he couldn't help but try to soften the fall for the child.

"She's dead," Spinsor noted, not unkindly, but rather curiously, "don't matter what 'appens to her now."

Spinsor knelt down and leaned forward so that his face was nearly touching the fence. Foul smelling breath entered the cage just as Ron was thrown forward. Ron started to cough, the water was pouring in with greater force now.

"And you'll be dead too soon enough," Spinsor murmured calmly, pointing his wand in Ron's face.

"Get up!" A voice snapped.

Ron jerked awake, coughing and sputtering, curling up in pain. He was wet, but it didn't feel like the normal fever sweat. It was cold and there was too much of it. His hoodie was soaked. Ron moaned. And his head hurt in a really bad way. It was normal for his head to hurt a little, but his pain medicine usually dulled it to a small consistent thud he barely noticed. He must be late then... or was it the nurse who was late? Somebody was late. He was sure.

The Carnival. Rose and Mary Salen had surprised him by blindfolding him and taking him on the zipper. He'd freaked out and blasted the door off the moment the ride came to a stop. It had caused him to puke his guts out and faint immediately afterwards from the magical drain and he'd been scolded by some wizard officials after waking up because of all the memory charms they'd had to perform. Mary had apologized profusely after that, but Ron had simply waved her away. It wasn't like he'd told her that he was terrified of being locked up.

He needed to take the pain medicine before it got really bad and if his pain medicine hadn't been given yet then the other medicines must not have been either. Ron tried to think of why that would be.

There was a reason he was absolutely sure, but for the life of him he couldn't think what that might be. Somebody had promised to make sure he'd take his medicine the next day... next day? What did he do? Uh... his head throbbed.

Ron reached forward blindly, not bothering to open his eyes, it would take too much effort. Rather than meeting the familiar feel of the summoning charm on the desk next to his hospital bed he felt open air. Confused Ron determined that he didn't have any choice, but to force his eyelids open in order to figure out where he was.

"Wake up you sodden git!" A voice snarled.

Fuuuuuuuuck.

Ron breathed in deeply as he tried to muster up not only the will power to move while hurting so bad, but also the desire to prove that the voice yelling at him was not who he thought it was. Squinting his eyes open Ron saw furious brown eyes framed by locks of orangish red strands glaring down at him.

Oh fuck. How did this happen? Ron looked around trying to figure out where he was. After several long moments of stunned silence Ron realized he was on the couch of Bill's house.

In England.

Dragging the pillow with him when he pushed himself up, Ron sat in horrified silence as George shot a glare at him. His memories of last night were slowly coming back. There had been a drinking game. They had said goodbye to loved ones and then... and then George and Bill had come out of nowhere. He vaguely remembered being screamed at while Bill half carried him to a port with Pig flittering about concernedly. He was pretty sure he'd lost consciousness a few times. And a bench. There was definitely a bench he'd puked on somewhere at some time last night.

That was when he realized something.

His hood was down.

Feeling exposed and oddly vulnerable Ron pulled the hood over his head only to have it pulled viciously down again.

"You think we didn't see?" George hissed accusingly. "You look like death!"

Ron visibly flinched. He knew he looked disgusting. He'd been avoiding the mirror for months now. He hadn't wanted to face what he looked like. He hated how bony he felt and how disgusting the wounds looked.

George laughed harshly, almost hysterically.

"I can't believe that you had the *balls* to lecture me when you've been drinking yourself to your' grave! You weigh almost nothing Ron! I easily picked you up after you passed out!" George screamed, leaning forward so far that spit hit his face.

He could see the fear and pain on George's face though, try as he might to hide it with anger.

Ron felt sick. Looking around he saw the empty bucket that George had apparently poured over him to wake him up. Gingerly reaching forward Ron pulled it towards him and set it down. George watched him with disgust.

Ron wanted to laugh and cry at the same time. He remembered a while back when he'd been worried that Harry and Hermione would find the potions if they'd visited and think he was some kind of addict. Somehow this felt much worse.

Now that he was fully awake he realized how much his torso and back *hurt* and his entire body felt as heavy as lead. He vaguely recollected that it was probably because of portkeying. He'd landed on the still very much open wound there. Even if he miraculously managed to get back to the international portkey building, a feat that



was so beyond him right now it was laughable, he had no money to pay for what would undoubtedly be a hefty price.

Silently he moved a bit, feeling his bandages pulling away from his wounds. Dried blood. They hadn't been changed last night or this morning like they were supposed to be. It was going to hurt. Looking up at George's pacing body he wondered where Bill was. Then a thought struck him.

"How long have I been here?" Ron rasped.

"It's two in the afternoon. I wasn't going to wait for you any longer," George snapped.

Ron paled as he realized how bad his situation really was. Somewhere in the house a door opened and soon after Bill came marching into the living room. He took a glance at Ron's soaked clothes and gave George a disapprovingly look that the one eared young man ignored.

"Bill," Ron rasped, trying to figure out how to best go about this. Bill was most definitely the one to plead with at the moment. George looked like he was spitting lava. "I know what this looks like, but it's really not. I swear! Please Bill... I need to get back to Australia."

His voice cracked causing him to wince. He was supposed to have his throat healed later today.

George laughed incredulously at him.

"Back? Oh, no you're not going back!" George announced.

Ron felt his head swim. Blinking rapidly Ron opened his mouth to explain, but Bill spoke.

"Did you flunk out of the Strategy Training? Is that why you really 'quit'?" Bill demanded quietly.

Both he and George stilled.

"No," Ron spoke forcefully, "The director said I could come back when I was better."

"They kicked you out for drinking? How could you be so... shit... you..." George sputtered.

"No!" Ron snapped, angry and hurt. "No! I'm not an alcoholic! It was one night, just listen to me! Please!"

"Ron... there's no use lying to us now," Bill pointed out as gently as he could. "We caught you beyond drunk, you've lost so much weight..." Here Bill grimaced, looking away from him. Ron pulled the pillow closer to himself, trying to hide as much as he could behind it. "And you just admitted that they let you go because of your problem."

"It's not that kind of problem," Ron rasped, "I'm not *that* kind of sick."

"Then please," George stretched out the words sarcastically, "give us your grand excuse for what we've seen so far. I'm dying to hear all about it."

Ron cringed at his wording.

"I told you about Rose didn't I?" Ron asked, looking straight at George dejectedly.

George seemed thrown off guard by the seemingly random question. He hesitated before nodding. Of course George knew who she was. Ron knew he did because he'd told him all about her through letters. George had even teased him about it, saying that Ginny would be jealous that she'd been replaced by a younger and cuter 'baby sister.'

This was it. There was no way to get out of telling them. He could already feel his body going through the withdrawal symptoms. The medical potions he'd been kept on were highly dangerous and the healers had explained that if he got better he would have to go

through a long process of being weaned off of them. If it wasn't the only option left to keep him alive he wouldn't have agreed to it.

"She's a child at the hospital you work with, you never shut up about her, the mother practically named you her permanent babysitter right?" George asked, half to clarify and half for Bill's sake.

Ron nodded, swallowing thickly.

"She's dead. There were complications. She died nine days ago. Some friends of mine wanted to take me out to cheer me up," Ron explained to them both.

George stared at him in stunned silence. Bill's face crumbled into a sympathetic grimace.

"I've never gone drinking before. I got a little carried away," Ron admitted, but not willing to go into greater detail.

"Then what *is* this Ron? Why would you do this to yourself? This... this looks beyond not eating," Bill insisted urgently.

"You have to promise not to tell the others," Ron blurted desperately.

"Too late for that Ron," George growled, "you should have thought about that before you did this to yourself."

Ron shook his head, willing it to stop throbbing, willing himself to find the right words that just wouldn't come.

"I... I don't work at the hospital," Ron relented finally.

His whole body trembled with his words. He wasn't ready to tell. He wasn't prepared for this. He hadn't been preparing himself for talking about it. He'd been preparing his family to learn of his death. He didn't know how to explain or how to be gentle or what he should say... he simply hadn't considered this possibility. He should have, but he hadn't. Facing the ritual he'd considered telling, but not the how.

"You don't... What do you mean? Your hands been practically glued to the hospital in the kitchen. Mum's always going on about how worried she is that you're exhausting yourself with work," George said in bewilderment.

Merlin, it felt like the words were glued solidly in his mouth. His throat was closing up.

"M a patient," Ron croaked out. "I contracted a dark magical infection in my bones and organs."

"What?" George hissed.

Bill sat heavily on the couch beside Ron, his legs not being capable of holding him up at that moment.

"I'm sick. I've been sick for a long time," Ron rasped out tiredly.

"How long is a long time, Ron?" Bill demanded.

"I never had any real intentions of going to Auror training. I wanted a hospital where you guys wouldn't have to see this," Ron admitted brokenly, gesturing down toward his body.

Bill buried his head into his hands while George kicked the love seat hard enough to slide it back several feet.

"That was six months ago Ron!" George roared.

"Six months," Bill breathed in dread. "How serious is this infection?"

George quieted, a fearful look crossing his features. Ron didn't want to answer that. He didn't want to see the looks on their faces. His trembling became worse. He brought his knees up to his chest, the action protested fiercely by his tender, hurting open wound, before burying his face in his knees. It was hard to breathe. He silently pleaded for them to go away, despite how futile such thoughts were.

Hands gripped his chin tightly and jerked his head up. George's deep brown eyes stared hard into his own.

"How bad is this?" George pressed.

Ron pulled his head away from him, mouth opening and closing as he attempted to divulge the information. Tears leaked from the corner of his eyes unbidden. Ron angrily wiped them away pressing his lips tightly together. He clenched his teeth and balled his fists hard enough to make the knuckles white like he did before facing a treatment. He'd won plenty of fights against himself. He just needed to suck it up and say it.

"I've got a year of treatment left... if I'm lucky. They gave me... they said that theirs only... I've got a 30-40% chance of surviving it," Ron rasped.

Bill's arms wrapped around him suddenly, extraordinarily gentle like their father. He was reminded of the times long ago when he'd sneak into Bill's bedroom and would fall asleep talking to him. Ron's shoulder's began to shake. Suddenly he didn't feel like the eighteen year old war veteran. He didn't feel like the best friend of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger who expected him to suck it up and be strong. He didn't feel like the pillar of strength Rose needed (had needed) and who (had) wanted to call him daddy.

He felt like a terrified teenager who'd been given a death sentence.

Ron turned into Bill's shoulder, burying his face into the man's chest. He didn't break out into screaming, heart wrenching sobs. They were quiet. Shallow breathing interrupted every few minutes by a single deep breath as if he were trying to collect himself and repeatedly failing. Bill's arms were gentle, but firm around his far too thin frame. At some point another body sat next to him, hesitantly putting an arm around his shaking shoulders. George.

The back pain he'd been feeling since he woke up suddenly spiked. Ron shuddered and clenched Bill's shirt. He felt dizzy and weak.

Trying to subtly wipe his eyes Ron pulled away.

"I need my medical potions," Ron rasped, voice strained.

George stood up, a determined look in his eye.

"What are they? I'll get ahold of them," George announced.

Ron shook his head.

"George... they take months to prepare. I need *my* potions back in Australia," Ron explained tiredly.

"What are they? What happens if you don't take them?" Bill demanded.

"I have a potion that numbs the pain. A potion that helps me keep the dark magic out of my organs so they continue to function, one that keeps my bones from deteriorating and a potion that stops my open wound from becoming infected from the open air," Ron listed off grimly. "All of which I have to take before lunch. It's two-thirty Bill."

George swore.

"What happens when you don't take them on time?" Bill asked, his face losing color.

"My body just sorta slowly stops functioning," Ron told them weakly.

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There were two Australian Aurors stationed at the International Portkey Station who'd been ordered to keep a look out for three redheads. Unknown to these three redheads Kingsley had already been informed of the incident and had thus far broken into the Weasley's Wizinging Wheezes and made a very undignified and bewildering appearance at the Burrow. Kingsley finally barged into Shell Cottage in an angry huff only to find a wand pointed at his throat by a terrified Fleur holding a fresh pile of broccoli in the other

hand. She'd just gotten home from the market to find a note from Bill saying he'd be back in a few days and to head over to the Burrow without him.

It was really something that he should have expected, but the small petite woman was so delicate looking it was hard to remember she'd been a champion during the Triwizard tournament only a few years ago. Then, with the grace of a man thoroughly scolded, Kingsley scattered out of the French woman's home with only a vague idea of what must have happened. If they were gone then something must have happened to make them realize Ron needed a hospital. Disapparating on the spot Kingsley knew he had to make a stop at St. Mungo's to make sure that the Weasley brothers hadn't chosen the hospital not supplied with what Ron needed.

Through this series of events it was with a sigh of exasperation that he discovered not two, but one Australian Auror at the Portkey station. They were being 'escorted' to the Rue Hospital at that very moment.

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Bill hadn't thought it was possible to feel annoyance beyond his mum's level of scary piercing him, but having an entire ward of glaring, angry healers and an Auror focused solely on himself and George sure as hell took the cake. Ron had been rushed into a medical room with his eyes rolling into the back of his head as he screamed in pain. It had been horrifying. George hadn't stopped looking shell shocked since Ron completely collapsed halfway to the hospital. Apparently Ron's body couldn't handle disapparition at that point. The magic involved damaged him.

*That* tidbit of information had caused Bill to feel an entirely new well of guilt in him that afternoon when Ron explained why they needed to take brooms. They'd disapparated away last night. The guilty look on George's face told him that he had connected the dots as well. They'd really hurt Ron by taking him like that.

*"Shite, no!" Antea said in shock and anger. "He's sick! For the love of Merlin bring 'im back! Don't hurt 'im."*

The young woman's desperate plea made a hell of a lot more sense today than it did last night.

Now they both sat outside their brother's room waiting anxiously for news. Nearly half an hour went by before an abnormally large man, around three fourths the size of Hagrid but trimmed down, stood before them with a strained smile in place.

"You're Ron's brothers correct?" The large man asked carefully, as if afraid to startle them.

Bill nodded, standing up immediately.

"I imagine that you're both confused and shocked right now... If you would like I can explain to you your brother's condition. I can't imagine Ron was particularly forth coming with the information."

"Thank you so much, yes, that would be greatly appreciated," said Bill graciously, the Auror was still eyeing them irritably from the seat across from them.

"My office is just down the hall, they'll come and inform us once Dr. Blake has stabilized him," the large man reassured them.

"Stabilized?" George questioned, face pale.

"The potions he takes keep him alive Mr. Weasley. I think Ron told you that at least... his body would have long given up on him without his potions and the treatment. Without them it's similar to dropping an apple unprotected into a bowl of acid," the large man stated bluntly.

His heart dropped into his stomach at those words. There was anger directed towards them in that last sentence.



"Is Ron going to be okay? It was only a few hours... it's not that bad is it?" George asked anxiously.

The large man stopped, visibly reigning in the anger that allowed that slip up.

"Forgive my rudeness. I know you didn't do it on purpose. He should be okay," the man apologized before entering a room to the left.

Bill followed the man silently into his office. Sinking into one of the chairs he put his head in his hands, allowing his long fingers to drag down his scars as he breathed in deeply. He heard George take the seat next to him.

"Ron is prone to doing that too when he's stressed," the large man noted, eyes watching him keenly. Bill almost felt like McGonagall was in front of him again demanding him to change ice into stone. It was then that he realized that he had no idea who this man was. Feeling rude on top of guilty Bill gave the man a sheepish smile.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch your name," Bill apologized.

"And I didn't ask you yours... I'm afraid I had a bit of a panic when I heard Ron had been 'kidnapped.' He's a patient I've become rather fond of this last month and it's left me frazzled. My name is Jimson Delvo, but you can call me Jim. I specialize in rehabilitation. Unfortunately we nearly lost Ron about six weeks ago. He was touch and go for several days and then bedridden for weeks afterwards. He had to perform exercises with me for a while in order to be well enough to walk again. Tough kid that Ron, griped the whole time, but never so much as took a break without me forcing him to," Jimson remarked proudly.

"He almost died?" George questioned, voice sharp. "He... he couldn't walk?"

Bill felt suddenly cold, despite the unnaturally warm temperature Australia exploded with in December. The chair beside him creaked

as George's grip tightened. Bill reached out and placed his hand on George's arm, silently telling him that he wasn't alone in this. Bill turned back to the man and swallowed thickly as he tried to get words to form. Jimson spoke first though.

"I'm sorry. That was insanely insensitive of me. I've never been in the position to inform family members. Normally by time a patient comes into my care the entire family has already been involved for a while," Jimson tried to explain. "My job almost always consists of helping those on the road to recovery. Patients like Ron who need rehabilitation to such a degree in the middle of a treatment are rare."

Bill nodded, trying his best to keep a calm façade. If he freaked out and panicked George would become a roaring mess of anger and hurt.

"Can you start from the beginning?" Bill suggested. "What exactly caused Ron to be so sick? How long has this been going on?"

"The origins of the dark magical infection would be an attack he suffered by a creature we have very little information about. The Department of Mysteries in Great Britain is refusing to relent any information concerning it," Jimson explained.

"The brain creature you mean?" George asked in confusion. "But that... that was nearly three years ago. There's no way... Pomphrey examined him, she's a damn good healer, there's no way she missed an infection."

"It wasn't an infection then," Jimson informed them. "They were scars that circled his arms and back possessing a trace amount of magic in it. Remember... it is only wizards who label a magic as dark that differentiates it. We label magic as dark when it shows consequences we deem as negative. Until we label it, it is simply magic. Identifying a trace amount of magic on a being, wizards and other magical creatures, who is essentially overflowing with it is preposterously difficult if one does not know exactly what they are looking for."

"So how did this trace amount of magic develop into a magical infection?" Bill asked resignedly.

"We don't know what the creature is, only that it left a magic that acts like a parasite. It fed off of Ron's own magic and spread inside his marrow and organs. Ron informed us that he started to feel a dull ache sometime during his sixth year of education that grew steadily worse," Jimson supplied tiredly. "It wasn't until after the war in Britain came into full swing that the ache became very painful for him though."

Bill felt sick. His stomach was rolling and twisting against his consent as he took in all the implications those words entailed. Ron had been aware that something was wrong even as far back as his wedding day, no, before his wedding day. There had been many opportunities up until that point when Ron could have said something, but chose not to. Just like the torture... Bill rubbed his face again rougher than before. Just like Harry, Hermione, and Ron's plans to break into Gringotts. Just like the entirety of the Hocrux hunt that they'd neglected to speak to anyone about. Bill buried his face deeper into his hands.

This did not surprise him.

It should have.

But it didn't.

"And... this treatment, what exactly is involved with it?" Bill asked shakily.

George had been slowly migrating further and further down in his chair, staring blankly ahead. Bill imagined that George was going over every shove, hit and insult he'd thrown at Ron in the past twenty four hours. George's guilt would be even worse than his own. As much as he pitied him at that moment Bill couldn't simply stop to play the part of the Agony Aunt for him.

"I guess the best way to explain would be to give his schedule to you and let you read over it," Jimson explained wearily as he pulled open a drawer. "I could talk all day about the medical tests and potions involved, but in all honestly I know that's now what you want to hear. You don't care about how we do check up's, you want to know what Ron has to go through."

Bill gave the man a grateful smile. He liked this man.

Jimson flipped open one of the thicker files and began milling through it as he continued talking.

"Kid's been kept at the hospital for a few months now after it was deemed he couldn't live on his own anymore, put up one hell of a fight against it too."

Bill almost smiled at that. Almost. The thought that Ron had been living on his own for so long, taking himself to the hospital, was a rather sobering image. When the papers describing the daily requirements Ron had to endure were placed in his lap Bill felt a weight lean against his shoulder. Trying to ignore George who was reading from behind him Bill let his eyes fall onto the first page.

It was like some twisted form of a planner. There were some potions that required Ron to take them in the mornings with food, some in the afternoons with water, others only once every three days. Reading their descriptions made him feel sick to his stomach. Words floated up into his brain and refused to leave.

*Toxic. Highly addictive. Will induce vomiting. Severe drop in body temperature. Corrosive to the intestines. Possible tumor formation.*

During the evenings Ron had to attend rehabilitation for walking and other exercises as Jimson had mentioned. Every two weeks there was something simply referred to as 'treatment' that required a higher dose of pain reliever potion and a lesser dose of the more volatile potions. There were no exercises with Jimson for three or four days following the 'treatment.'

"What's this treatment like?" Bill asked, feeling a sense of foreboding.

Jimson grimaced.

"The potions can't break down the infection, it's attached to Ron's being, his magic. The potions numerous jobs include repelling the infection from getting worse, keep the infection out of the healing portions of Ron's body, numb the pain as much as possible, and lessens' the infections power against his body."

Jimson paused, as if trying to find the right words.

"The treatment is meant to drain the infection, and as a consequence, Ron's magic from certain portions of his body."

"Wait!" George spoke up, looking stricken. "Is Ron going to lose his ability to perform magic?"

"No, it's not possible to drain a magical being of their magic without killing them," Jimson answered. "It's also the reason why the treatment is so painful though. When we drain the magical infection from the spot of his body we're essentially cutting a piece of him away like splinching, but much slower. One of the problems we've encountered with the treatment is that the pain reliever potion contains magical ingredients. When we drain the spot we're also draining the effectiveness of the potion for that area. Once it's been drained we have to use a special ritual to close it off from the rest of the body while manually replenishing the spot with magic."

"What do you mean by manually replenishing his magic?" Bill asked, confused.

"To put it bluntly... we have to kill a part of Ron. A corpse cannot produce magic because it loses its magical core when death takes it, but Ron is still very much alive. The portion of his body that is cut off from the rest of his magic is still connected to his core. The core of a magical being cannot be tampered with no matter how strong or

powerful the magic coming against it is. Ron's core has to replenish the magic naturally which takes time," Jimson stressed.

"There's no way to dull the pain, at all?" Bill asked, stunned.

George pulled the papers from Bills hands to examine the schedule.

"His next treatment is tomorrow... Will what we did affect that?" George demanded in a voice Bill hadn't heard since Fred's death. It was small and fearful, like all the air had been taken from him.

"We can't put off giving him another treatment again, we're going to have to go through with it, but it means that Ron will be very weak for longer than he normally is," Jimson answered.

"I don't even know what his normal is anymore," George said bitterly, messaging his forehead. "How does he normally handle all of this? What are his bad days like? Did we... are we going to cause him bad days because of this?"

Jimson was quiet for a long drawn out moment as he considered George's sputtered questions.

"A normal day for Ron means that he can go with his friends to eat breakfast (or drink tea in Ron's case) at a local café and come back before he needs to rest. Usually Ron will ask one of the nurses to go with him for a short afternoon walk if he's feeling good. If we're lucky we can get him to eat a little for lunch before he falls asleep again. Dinner, more often than not, tends to be out of the question because one of the potions makes him sick. One or both of his friends come for a few hours to hang out with Ron at some point during the day. Potion administration throughout the night, side effects, and nightmares mean that Ron doesn't sleep much, but what he does while he's awake during the night is something I don't know," Jimson told them soberly.

"And..." Bill hesitated, "... and on bad days?"

"He's curled up on his bed in pain. Doesn't drink. Doesn't eat. Doesn't move for fear of making it worse," Jimson stated as gently as possible. "What you did probably just means that Ron will need a lot more sleep than usual, but it could have turned out a lot worse."

Both Bill and George flinched at that. The sound of heels clicking against tiled floor echoed through the halls before a very prim, tall woman in a healers uniform walked through the door.

"Ronald Weasley is stable. Dr. Blake says that as long as they don't wake him the brothers can sit in the room with him," the prim woman announced.

They scrambled to their feet before the woman even finished talking. Jimson nodded before gesturing for them to follow the woman.

"What are we going to tell mum?" George murmured as they walked into the hospital room.

Ron lay asleep with bright strings of magic wrapping around his body. Every few moments the area over his mouth would turn red, coinciding with a hitch in his breath. The hoodie had been stripped away and nothing but a long sleeved hospital shirt covered his torso. It really showed off how emaciated Ron had become. Bill shuddered.

"I can't tell her something like this through a letter... I just can't do it. I'll write her and explain that we're helping Ron wrap things up here so he can come for the holidays with us," Bill answered.

It was a testament to how deeply the situation was affecting him that George didn't have anything to say to that.

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When Ron woke up George leaped from his seat, torn between the thrill of seeing him okay and the need to scream him-self hoarse for hiding the fact that he *really* wasn't okay.

"George?" Ron mumbled groggily.

"Yes George, your absolutely livid brother, that George," George snapped.

Ron winced before turning onto his side and weakly pushing himself up into a sitting position on the hospital bed.

"Where's Bill?" Ron rasped.

"Here," Bill announced, walking into the room with two sodas.

"You've been out for awhile so I went to get us some drinks."

Ron nodded slowly staring at his eldest brother with narrowed eyes.

"What happened to your face?" Ron asked carefully.

Bill winced, a large black eye and one swollen nostril evident.

"Antea says hi and that she'll be here for your treatment tomorrow," Bill answered with a dry chuckle. "George's nether regions received a nasty shock as well from a hex."

Ron's face scrunched up like he was trying to hold back a sneeze before he burst into fits of deep laughter. The magical strings turned a dangerous shade of red as the redheads chuckles turned into wheezes.

"That kills," Ron rasped through fits of mirth.

George's face had turned a nice shade of red, only furthering Ron's exhausted snickers.

"Ron," Bill began softly, causing Ron to become somber, "We need you to tell us why you did this... we need to know what you thought you were doing."

"It's not that mind boggling is it?" Ron asked, he was staring at a portion of the wall above both of their heads rather than meeting their eyes. "There's not much of me left is there? You think I wanted anyone to see this? Having to sit there, day in and day out, only to



watch me get sicker and sicker. I didn't want any of that for you guys. I didn't want any of you to deal with this."

"So what?" George hissed. "You've just... given up? You're not even trying to fight this?"

"I'm trying!" Ron rasped angrily. "I'm trying every bloody effing day to fight it. Don't you dare say I haven't tried!"

"So you didn't want us to see you sick?" Bill half asked, half stated.

Ron let out a frustrated sigh.

"It wasn't about you seeing me sick... it is, but it isn't. I didn't want any of you taking care of me. I didn't want you to put your life on hold for me," Ron rasped, then muttered, "I'm not explaining this well at all."

"How would we be putting our lives on hold?" George asked, completely bewildered.

"Just drop it George... just... Godric I just woke up so just go bugger yourself okay? Can't you two just pretend we had a giant row and go away?" Ron pleaded with them.

"Not likely," George muttered.

"We talked to Dr. Blake while you were out. He highly recommended that you be placed into a setting where you're surrounded by family. *He* says that it will increase your chances of survival. He *also* said that he's told you this numerous times," Bill stated with narrowed eyes.

The anger in Bill's voice was a little surprising to George.

Bill was rarely angry.

Ron squirmed under the glare, looking away from the both of them.

"So I'll ask you again... what were you *thinking* ?!" Bill hissed.

"What would be the point in dragging all of you into this? Your all so bloody noble you'd be corralling together to pay all my medical bills and be left with nothing! Harry and Hermione would give up opportunities to help me out. Anyone who got stuck with me would be miserable," Ron bit out.

"Dr. Blake told us that you were covered under the WVVMC program," George pointed out.

"Only after Shacklebolt found out in September," Ron answered.

"So," George began, confused, "what did you do before you were put on the program?"

The door to the hospital room opened and a nurse walked in carrying bandages.

"I'm sorry boys, but he needs his bandages changed," Healer Cecily murmured.

"Can we stay?" Bill asked.

"We're staying," George declared at the same time.

Bill gave George a reproachful glance.

"I don't want them in here," Ron declared.

"I'm sorry, but seeing as Mr. Weasley is over eighteen he has the right to privacy even if your family," Healer Cecily told them firmly.

George began to turn red.

"With all due respect," Bill cut in, "if Ron is to come live with us..."

"Which I'm not," Ron interjected.

"Then we need to know how to change his bandages. He is, at the very least, going to come with us for the holiday," Bill explained, ignoring Ron.

"That sounds like a fun time, the near cripple, vomiting mess coming for Christmas. Cheers!" Ron drawled sarcastically. "I'm not coming."

"You'll come or I'll bring the family here!" George threatened.

"Not even you can afford that!" Ron challenged.

"I won't need the whole family... just mum, Harry and Hermione," George answered with a triumphant smirk.

"You wouldn't dare!" Ron hissed.

"Ohhohoho," George crowed, "yes, yes I would. It would be rather expensive, but since its Christmas time it won't hit my income too badly."

"I don't want them to see me like this! I don't want them to know!" Ron roared, voice cracking.

"Why not?" George yelled back. "None of the reason's you've given are good enough!"

"It's just gonna make everything harder for everyone," Ron shouted.

"Not as hard as not having you at all!" George bellowed.

Ron's mouth snapped closed.

"Please, keep it down, there are other patients," Healer Cecily scolded.

"How can *that* be less hard than *this* ?" Ron asked brokenly.

George plopped down beside Ron on the bed.

"Because, you great giant prat, as it turns out a lot of people need you," George said, voice softening.

"I can't be what they need anymore. I can't even stand for long, let alone do anything to help," Ron mumbled.

"We don't need you to be beside us fighting our battles, we just need you to be beside us, and we're here for you when you need help to keep standing," George said, nudging Ron softly.

"So their staying?" Healer Cecily asked. Voice suspiciously choked.

Ron reluctantly nodded.

"Alright then Mr. Weasley I need you to move so I can change Mr. Weasley's bandages," Healer Cecily announced.

"Just call me George, it will make things less confusing," George told her in exasperation.

The Healer nodded before she ordered Ron to sit up all the way. Ron did so obediently, helping to pull off his hoodie and shirt. George noticed how practiced it was. They didn't awkwardly bump into one another. There was no embarrassment about being half naked in front of this woman like George expected. She and Ron acted as if they'd done it a million times.

George knew that, realistically speaking, they must have done this daily. There was something about the practiced motions that struck a chord in him and screamed 'It's real. This is what I do every day.' When the clothes were taken off George cringed at the bloody bandages that covered his little brother's torso and back. The woman tutted at them, but made no comment. When she pulled them off George gagged. Beside him he heard more than saw Bill bang into the chair behind him.

"Come here," Healer Cecily instructed.

George did so, eyes never leaving the open sore that dark bruises blossomed from like some twisted flower. He sat heavily in the chair next to the nurse. Ron's eyes were solely focused on the healer, adamantly avoiding looking at him. He was okay with that. He didn't particularly want to look Ron in the eyes at the moment either.

"Alright, the first thing you have to do is clean the area. Right now there are two which is dangerous, but we didn't have much of a choice. The one on his back is nearly healed, but the salve still has to be applied to it for a few more days at least," Healer Cecily explained.

She dipped a white cloth into a bowl of water before gently wiping away crusted blood and pus from the sore. George winced at the same time Ron flinched. Bill moved to the other side of the bed and sat on the end; close, but not in the way.

"Unless we're extracted the infection we try to keep as little magic out of the area as possible. Normally I would simply use a cleansing spell on a wound like this as it's much less painful than physically touching it, but it's better than taking the risk of recontamination," Healer Cecily said. "Turn please Ron."

Ron did as instructed, his back now visible George grimaced at the small wound and prominent spine. How long would it take him to get used to looking at his emaciated brother? Would he always flinched when Ron needed his bandages changed? Was his reactions one of the reasons why Ron refused to look at him?

*There's not much of me left is there? You think I wanted anyone to see this?*

"The bandages can be magically secured since they aren't being performed on his body," Healer Cecily explained as she pulled out fresh bandages.

George nodded to show that he was still listening. She dipped her hands into the healing salve and as gently as possible applied it to

the back. Ron still cringed. Then, with a flick of her wrist, the bandages wrapped around and secured themselves around the sores.

"Now I have to heal his throat. We normally only have to do this once every few weeks, so he won't have to worry about another healing for a bit at least," Healer Cecily explained.

"Do you have to talk like I'm not here?" Ron rasped playfully.

"Don't give me a hard time or I'll tell Pam," Healer Cecily teased back.

"What's she gonna do? Not let me help her with her puzzles?" Ron demanded.

"Good point, I'll tell Mopsy," Healer Cecily amended.

"Hmf," Ron responded.

George exchanged an amused smile with Bill. At least Ron hadn't been completely alone these last six months. The same glares that had been directed towards him and Bill when they first arrived were also the people who bantered and took care of Ron. The same woman who blackened Bill's eye and hexed his balls had done so on Ron's behalf. The healers who resolutely ignored their request to heal the said eye did so out of spite for their mistakes against Ron. These were good people who Ron had become close to. It was a comforting thought among so many of the terrible ones he'd been having these last few days.

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## AUTHORS NOTE

### **The boys are coming home next chapter!**

(I have a hard time responding to reviews because of classes, sorry guys, but they inspire and excite me to no end! Even the not nice

ones. So even if I'm a bad Author for not responding know I love them!)

This sentence is an idea I had about why protective love magic like what Lily used to protect Harry can beat a killing curse. If she used her core, her entire magical being, out of love to protect him then it makes sense that the core cannot be touched by dark magic like the killing curse. Does it make sense?

"The core of a magical being cannot be tampered with no matter how strong or powerful the magic coming against it is."

TroyWeb

Coincidentally that's the same name for Troy Universities (my University) Financial and Educational accounts. I keep thinking 'why is my school... oh right, duh, blond moment' whenever I see you review. Anyways I just want you to know that the torture scene actually has a very important role in this story and ties in very nicely, but not until several chapters ahead.

PureHearts

Muhahahah... cliffhangers rule. And I believe that someone already used that particular death threat against Edger Allen Poe. I am truly honored. Hopefully I won't end up like him though.

On a personal note: I just went into an interview for a job at booksamillion this afternoon and they offered it to me right after the interview. I'm so excited. My family needed more money than what I was working for taking care of dogs, so I'm very happy that I got a job that I can enjoy so quickly. It was the first place I put a resume in for. I feared that with the economy and so many people being laid off that it would be difficult, but they really liked me! I'll still be taking care of dogs and doing college as well, but I want you to know that, as it's always been, all my free time is put into writing. My own original novel is coming along quite well too. I just wish I could have

you guys read it and give me feedback. Alas! The internet is not a trustworthy place to put a person's long hard work on for all to see.



# Disillusioned Ch12

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. J.K Rowling thinks fanfiction is a marvelous idea so get off my back all you haters!

## Chapter 12: Disillusioned

"I see a light in the kitchen. Let us not deprive Molly any longer of the chance to deplore how thin you are."

### Albus Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince

*There were moments... moments like this that it felt like Harry and Hermione had slapped him.*

*Hard.*

*It was never anything big. In fact they never noticed when they did it and Ron would rather have another go at puking slugs like last year than mention it. This particular time they'd been working on a transfiguration assignment; turning a small square shaped pillow into a rock. Hermione was actually having a hard time with this one so he and Harry had been trying to find tips or instructions inside the book alongside Hermione.*

*He found it. A single sentence in a paragraph completely unrelated to the topic; an offhanded remark by the author. Really... it was no surprise they'd had such a hard time figuring it out. Triumphant and rather proud that he'd managed to find it before Hermione, Ron pointed his wand at the pillow and very slowly went through the incantation while keeping in mind the advice.*

'Transfiguring an object into anything belonging to the earth's floor requires very slow wand movement and a deep, slowly spoken, strong voice.'

*The pillow quivered before turning grey and molding into stone. Absolutely ecstatic Ron leaped from his bed and rushed down to the common room. Why Harry and Hermione insisted on being uncomfortable while they worked was beyond him.*

*"Hermione!" Ron called out as he walked up to the table, a silly grin on his face.*

*"Whatever you want can wait until I'm finished figuring out this question Ron," Hermione dismissed.*

*"But I..." Ron began, slightly put off.*

*Hermione snapped her book closed and gave Ron an annoyed glare.*

*"What!? What question are you having difficulties on?" Hermione demanded, hand out.*

*"The three of us are supposed to be looking up one question together," Ron reminded with a brittle tone, then added, "I'm not having difficulties!"*

*His pride thoroughly put out and defenses up he almost forgot why he came down.*

*"You wouldn't be here if you weren't having difficulties," Hermione simpered.*

*Ron glowered at her.*

*"Found it!" Harry cried, throwing the book in front of Hermione to stall their argument.*

*Hermione's features immediately brightened as she turned to Harry.*

*"That's wonderful! Where was it?" She asked, pulling the book toward her.*

*" It was an accident. Found it in the chapter before this one. Everything's got to be done really slow," Harry answered.*

*" I knew we'd find it," Hermione nearly squealed. She turned to Ron in a much better mood than before and smiled at him. "Why don't you show me the question and I'll help you?"*

*Ron's glower deepened. Turning on his heels, muttering darkly to himself about how it all friends, Ron stomped out of the common room much to the confusion of Harry and Hermione. It probably wouldn't have hurt as much if it was the first time they'd done that to him rather than the seventh or eighth. He knew they didn't mean to, but sometimes having friends that were smarter and more skilled than him made him feel rather stupid and useless.*

*To be fair Harry hadn't done anything wrong this time, but it was the boy who lived who so casually and accidentally cut off their conversation last night because Fred and George needed to talk to him about quidditch. Their talk was taken to a corner away from Ron as if he didn't belong and wouldn't understand. He was well aware that that particular moment was jealousy, but he wasn't sure if it was the warm, inviting tones Fred and George talked to his best friend with and not him or if it was that he'd been slightly snubbed by his best friend in favor of his brothers. It could also be said that he was still irritated that Fred and George had given Harry the Marauder's Map instead of him. The way they treated Harry like he was their equal and Ron's better made him squirm with hurt and confusion. How are you supposed to react when your brothers like your best friend better than they like you?*

*It was stupid and he felt like a girl for being mad over such little things, but knowing that feeling this way was stupid did absolutely nothing to change it. He couldn't just not be hurt by it, as much as he had tried. All he could really do was try to make sure nobody else knew about his being oversensitive about stupid stuff by keeping quiet about it. It really honestly wasn't a big deal that Hermione thought he was stupid. It truly didn't matter that his brother's liked to talk to Harry a lot more. It shouldn't matter or bother him that Harry*

*got along so well with everybody else and left him behind to interact with them. So what if he didn't really have anyone outside of Harry and Hermione? There was Dean, Seamus and Neville wasn't there? He just needed to stop being so bloody overemotional. None of that was important.*

*In their dorm room rather than feeling proud of the stone sitting on his bed Ron felt irritated by it. He shoved it underneath the bed and pulled out his Divinations homework, angrily writing out dreams about certain people having misfortunes falling upon them. Professor Trelawney would be happy at least.*

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George couldn't get the screaming out of his head.

He couldn't get the image of Ron nearly breaking Bill's hand because he was gripping it just *that* hard as he screamed in pain.

The treatment Ron went through the following morning had been far worse than he could have imagined.

Holding Ron's shaking body in his arms as Bill was taken away to have his hand treated had been like being dumped into icy water. So he just sat there for a few hours holding him to his body long after his little brother had fallen asleep. Doctor Blake said that they could take him home now that Ron had undergone treatment. He'd need to be back in two weeks though and they would have to make sure that Ron strictly followed all the potion dosages. Exercise therapy could be done at St. Mungo's. Several owls had been sent there with necessary potions and treatment outlines as well as emergency procedures in case anything happened.

It had taken all night to convince Ron to come to the Burrow with them. The exhausted redhead lost his voice snarling and rasping at them. Ron couldn't yell anymore. That had been a shocker. He didn't have the energy and between coughing, screaming and vomiting his throat was been damaged over and over again. So between

George's threats and Ron's own exhaustion they managed to coerce him into coming.

At some point Bill had walked into the room and began fondly stroking Ron's hair like their mother did when they were sick. Their mum would be expecting them this late afternoon. They'd made that plan without knowing what the treatment was like. Dr. Blake claimed that Ron could make the trip safely with the precautions in place, but that they'd need to go slow. Time was fading fast though and George felt nervous the less time he had all of this to himself. He sort of understood what Ron meant now. The understanding that what he was going to tell them was going to hurt.

Ron didn't recognize something though. The idea that Ron had been *alone* and dealing with *this* for months behind their backs was nearly as painful as the very news of illness itself. They hadn't noticed. They'd been sending letters back and forth in anger while Ron had been... been... Letters. That had been another huge row last night. He'd been helping, more like doing, all of Ron's packing. The brat had grumbled something about being able to do it himself, but the way his body sagged against the head frame of the bed told him all he needed. That had been when he'd found them.

Ron hadn't been paying attention. One of the nurses had come in to clean his wounds and George had simply continued dumping clothes unceremoniously into Ron's magically expanded backpack. They'd been shoved under a Charms book from the local library. His mind had been half way through coming up with a joke about Hermione's bad influence on his little brother when his eyes finally started taking in the words written messily on paper.

Just as he couldn't get the sound of him screaming in pain he couldn't unread the letters either. They were Ron's last will. He really had been planning on keeping it from them till his last breath. *That* had been its' own individual argument. He felt unbearably guilty about it considering it kept Ron up all night. He was so used to not having to think about things like that. Who cared if Ron missed a little sleep? But seeing Ron exhausted to the bone and unprepared for

the treatment to follow had quickly told him exactly why *he* should care about how much sleep Ron got.

So when Ron had woken up, barely conscious and not in the best of moods, it had taken a lot of coaxing to get him bundled up for the cold weather of England. Dr. Blake had given them specific instructions on how to go about 'safely' transporting Ron. It would be a lot slower, but much more suitable for his condition.

Ron had come home with them; for the holiday at least.

Ron had fought hard against *that* particular decision.

They were still 'discussing' the after verdict.

It was a very strange sight to see Bill giving Ron a piggy back ride like when they were young. George himself couldn't carry Ron because he was too short. Bill could only just barely, despite how little Ron weighed, due to the fact that Ron's gangly body was at least a couple inches taller than Bill's. But there it was. Long arms wrapped around Bill's neck with half lidded eyes staring almost blankly back at him and a large hoodie engulfing his body. Poor sod.

He and Bill had talked about waiting another day, but it had taken so much convincing that they didn't want to give Ron more time to change his mind or argue. They'd secured Ron well during the port key trip and took the night bus back to Catchpole rather than disapparating or flying brooms.

Walking into the Burrow felt like a death march George concluded. He felt hollow and shaky all over. Beside him Bill seemed just as unsteady as he was. He imagined that the ashen color of Bill's face was mirrored on his own. Taking one last glance towards Ron sitting dismally beside the door he caught the fear and apprehension in his little brother's eyes. Closing the door gently George turned to Bill and gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile. Footsteps came bounding down the stairs causing both of them to jerk and spin around.

"Where is he?" Molly cried out excitedly.

Their mother had always been the first one to the door as if she had some inner power to know when guests were coming.

The woman stopped in her tracks at the sight of their faces. Behind her Harry, Hermione, Percy and Charlie came rushing in at the sound of Molly's voice. Hermione just barely stopped in time to keep from bumping into the older woman, but it was all for not when Harry bumped into her and they both hit her back. George noted absently that his mother's feet didn't move so much as an inch as her eyes studied them like a hawk. And dad wasn't home. This wouldn't be nearly as easy without the calm, strong presence of their father here.

"I'm so sorry Mrs. Weasley," Hermione called apologetically, but her eyes were searching for Ron already.

"He didn't come with you?" Molly breathed out, clearly heartbroken by her own conclusions.

Charlie scowled angrily which turned even uglier at the devastated looks on Harry and Hermione's faces. Bill and George shared a glance before Bill stepped forward. Even after all these years of living away from each other when it came down to it, it was still the big brother's duty to take up the worst job.

"Mum... he came with us. He's here. There's just something I have to tell you before you see him," Bill said gently.

"What's this all about? If he's here then I want to see him," Molly announced, trying to push passed her eldest.

George could tell that she'd picked up that something was very wrong.

"Mum!" Bill snapped, already knowing he was going to have to make this clear. "You will see him, but I need to tell you something before you do!"

Molly stilled, looking at Bill with that same calculating look as before.

"You're preparing me for something," Molly finally whispered in a horrified voice. "He's hurt badly is he?"

Molly's eyes filled with determination as she glared at George and made to get passed him once more.

"Well then I need to see my boy!" Molly declared, daring George to resist her.

When he did and firmly stood in front of the door to keep his mother out it was *almost* amusing to see the shock on her face. If the situation wasn't so serious he would have laughed, but the thought of what was sitting outside the door killed any joy he could have gotten out of all this.

"If you walk out that door Ron will disappear and I can't guarantee that any of us will see him again," Bill roared.

Molly recoiled from the door as if she'd been burned. The rest of the family had similar expressions of horror on their faces. At some point during their arguing George had noticed that Fleur and Ginny had come into the cramped hallway as well. Fleur was taking everything in with a cautious air, aware that Ron had been in her home only yesterday, but not having seen him.

Bill's choice of words were a tad bit of an exaggeration, but it did get the job done, so who was he to argue? It was close enough to be painful anyhow. Ron certainly wouldn't be able to disappear in his state. He wouldn't even be able to *run* away.

"Listen," George called out over the outburst of questions that swamped them all. "We need to go into the living room to talk. This isn't going to work and the longer it takes us the longer Ron's gonna sit out there in the cold. It took a lot of bloody work to even get him here so you will all listen to us."



Clearly shaken by this news the group trudged reluctantly into the living room.

Harry looked mutinous, but when Bill reached for the teens shoulder and squeezed it he calmed down. George gave Bill a quizzical look. As far as he knew the two hadn't really talked all that much, so this sudden acceptance of Bill's decisions took George by surprise. Harry simply wasn't the type to accept authority well.

Once everyone was seated George stood guard at the entrance that lead to the front door. He didn't miss the glare that Harry and Charlie shot him for that.

Bill paced the length of the room, clearly trying to figure out the best way to explain.

"Spit it out already," Charlie snapped, clearly agitated and restless.

Bill sent a glance Charlie's way before stopping in the middle of the room and taking a deep breath.

"Do you remember this past summer when Ron stopped playing quidditch with the rest of us?" Bill queried.

"When he was arguing with everyone?" Percy asked, his bewilderment reflected on everyone's faces.

"Please don't tell me that prat is still having a hissy fit about this past summer," Ginny snapped, though she seemed unsure in her anger, as if even she didn't quite believe it had anything to do with what was going on, but secretly hoped that was all.

"Ginny, be quiet," George growled.

Ginny turned to him with a furious expression on her face and opened her mouth to tell him where to shove it.

"Ginny shut your mouth, this is no time for an argument," Bill said, glaring at her.

Her mouth immediately snapped closed, but she glowered at them from her spot.

"Do you remember when Ron stopped playing quidditch with the rest of us?" Bill repeated earnestly.

Everyone exchanged glances before Harry spoke up.

"Everyone was really mad at him then so no one bothered to ask him if he wanted to play."

Bill shook his head. There was a flash of realization in Charlie's eyes.

"Ron was opting out earlier than that remember? He kept sitting out with Hermione and watched us," Charlie grumbled.

"Right," Bill said with a nod. "Do you remember how he was sleeping a lot and not eating as much?"

"Where are you going with this Bill?" Molly asked quietly.

Bill kneeled in front of his mother and gripped her hand.

"Ron was sick when he was with us this past summer mum, not a cold or flu, but really ill," Bill told her gently, but loudly so that everyone could hear.

"No! We would have noticed if he was sick," Harry said immediately, standing up.

Hermione stood up too, gripping Harry's arm.

"We did though Harry, remember? We never woke him up because we could tell he needed it. We reprimanded Charlie once didn't we? For waking him," Hermione told him shakily.

"But he wasn't that bad!" Harry denied. "We were all tired because of nightmares. Hell... We're still tired because of nightmares! We were

just exhausted. It wasn't... he would have told us!"

"Like he told us about his shaky hands?" Hermione questioned.

"Shaky hands?" Charlie asked incredulously.

George too stared, remembering the teacup incident with new light.

"He said he went to the healer for it," Harry explained with dawning horror. "He said it was a side effect of all the dark spells he got hit with. They were trembling all the time. His hands wouldn't stop shaking, but he said it just made it a little difficult to do wand work. It wasn't anything serious."

"He lied," Bill stated quietly, silencing all of them. "He went to St. Mungo's and was told that he was really ill. He was taking medical potions while he was here. That's why he was so moody and irritable."

"You said he was sick... he's better now though right? He's been working and he went to Auror training and he's been interning and everything. He couldn't do that if he was ill!" Hermione said, practically pleading with him. Beside her Harry had gone pale.

"He's..." Bill choked. "He never went to Australia for Auror training. He's been getting sicker and sicker since he left. He went to Australia for treatment for his illness."

"He's sick and you left him outside in the cold?" Molly hissed, standing with motherly fury.

"Mum... you don't understand how bad it is. He wouldn't come into the house until we prepared you. He didn't even want to come mum!" Bill said, his voice rising. "He didn't want us to see him like this. He wanted to get better before he came back. That's why he wouldn't let Harry and Hermione go see him. That's why he wouldn't come back!"

"It's really bad. The treatment they have him on is really harsh," George told them shakily. "He's lost a lot of weight and he's in a lot of pain."

"He's what?!" Molly shrieked, looking about ready to barrow through him.

"I'll go get him," George told her hurriedly, backing out of the room, Charlie looked about ready to charge into him as well. If Bill had received their father's gentleness then Charlie had received their mother's ferociousness.

Opening the front door George kneeled before his emaciated, broken little brother bundled up in a jacket ridiculously large for him. Ron shivered, hugging himself tightly as George pulled him to his feet.

"Ready?" George asked quietly.

"No," Ron rasped honestly.

A loud, high pitch shriek of horror sounded and Ron was immediately enveloped in a tight hold before he even entered the house.

"Godric," George heard Charlie gasp from ahead of them.

"Give him room to breathe!" Bill roared. "This is why we talked to you beforehand. He doesn't need all of you freaking out on him!"

George watched Ron carefully as his little brother winced every time someone shouted and the way he leaned into the hug not out of want but necessity.

"Mum... Ron needs to sit down. He just had a treatment this morning." George told her firmly.

She nodded into her son's chest, but rather than let go she began to drag Ron towards the living room. If it wasn't so sad George would

have laughed at the fact that Ron's feet were sliding across the ground with the force of their mother's pull.

"Mum," Ron rasped.

George followed noticing Ron cringing away from the stares of shocked horror on Harry and Hermione's faces as he was dragged into the living room passed everyone. Percy was standing in the background, fretful and clearly wanting to say something, but appeared to feel it wasn't his place anymore. If Ron didn't need him more he would already be over there talking to his older brother.

"Mum," Ron rasped as loud as possible. "You're hurting me. Please let go."

Molly stepped away like she'd been slapped. No longer having his support pillar Ron collapsed onto the nearest couch.

"Why didn't you tell us the truth?!" Charlie growled.

Ron shrunk away from Charlie keeping his eyes trained on his lap. Bill sat beside Ron glancing at George. He understood instantly. Jumping over the top of the couch George took the other side. Ron was already heavily leaning against Bill and George had to wonder how much the 'first' trip back to England had tired him out.

"Can we talk about this in the morning?" Ron begged, exhausted. "I'm really tired and I've been arguing with these two for three days. They win. I give up. I surrender. Just please... I'm about to fall over."

The silence that followed that admittance was deafening.

"There's two potions you have to take with food before we let you sleep Ron," Bill reminded him.

"I know. I know about my own damn potions Bill. I take them every single day. I don't need *you* to give them to me. Just like I don't need you to get my food like you've been doing. Just like I don't need you

to sit outside the fucking bathroom to tell me its okay when I'm vomiting. *You* are not going to 'let me sleep' because I am 'going to sleep.' For Merlin's sake just because I'm sick doesn't mean I'm incompetent," Ron rasped tiredly, far beyond his limits, and clearly having delivered this speech before.

"I know," Bill said in a placating manner.

"No, you don't, you really, really don't. I'm grabbing something from the kitchen, taking my potions and going to sleep. I don't want to argue. You can squeal on me to your heart's content down here for the rest of the night for all I care," Ron muttered morosely.

"You can't just leave it like that Ron," Charlie barged in with his booming voice. "You can't just walk through the door looking like a starving homeless person and leave us like that."

Ron's eyes sparkled with anger and George cringed at Charlie's wording.

"That is where you are wrong, because you see, I had to go through a nasty emergency ritual yesterday morning after having withdrawals because of the cock-up these two caused. After that I had to spend my entire bloody afternoon and night dealing with them," Ron hissed furiously, gesturing to both Bill and George. "This morning I had to go through treatment which is just bloody fucking-tastic thanks. Then dunderhead one and dunderhead two announced that I had to travel across the planet to spend Christmas time with all of you. I'm tired. I'm feel like I'm gonna vomit. Everything hurts. I'm frozen to the bone, literally. So I'm going to take my happy arse upstairs, I'm going to give my pillows a nice cuddle, and there's not a damned thing any of you can do about it!"

Ron's voice cracked harshly with his raised voice. Ron put a hand to his head as he sagged further against Bill leaving the rest of the room in stunned silence.

"I'm sorry," Ron rasped, voice cracking further from strain, "I know you need an explanation and I know there are things I need to tell you, but... I can't. I can't do that for you right now. I physically can't do it."

Ron stood up on trembling legs to leave the room. Immediately Bill, George, Hermione and Harry were at his side. Ron smiled weakly at them.

"I've got him," Hermione announced shakily, pulling Ron's arm over her shoulder to best support his weight.

"I'll get his potions, I left them in the hall," Bill said quietly.

"No, let me," Harry announced.

George shared a glance with Bill. They could tell that Harry and Hermione both desperately *needed* to take care of Ron at that moment. There was anger and vast confusion, but there was also hurt and longing. Bill nodded slowly. They'd wait until the two came downstairs again.

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Ron had never been in any sense of the word fat. In fact he was rather thin, but he was also unnaturally tall, especially when compared to his two short best friends. There had been several instances in the past when Ron had been forced to use Hermione or Harry as a crutch. Hermione had tried to carry Ron back up through the entrance their first year when she got back from helping Harry with the Potions trial to get to the stone. She wasn't able to do it. She'd been forced to wait there while Ron lay unconscious. During third year when his leg was broken and arm bitten she'd had Harry's help, and between the two of them, they'd helped Ron walk. When she'd splinched Ron, she and Harry had, had to carry him into the tent. It had been difficult, but manageable.

The moment Ron's weight fell fully upon her shoulder's Hermione wanted to cry. Not just soft cry, but outright sob. There was no

difficulty. She didn't need Harry's help. A fact that Harry looked startled and downright terrified of. Ron wouldn't look her in the eye as she helped him into the kitchen and into one of the chairs. He wouldn't look Harry in the eye either as the black haired teenager brought the bag in and placed it on the counter. She could see the fury bubbling under Harry's calm façade. She felt it herself. There was too much, too many things to process all at once.

"Which ones are they?" Harry croaked out.

Ron pulled the bag towards him and slowly shifted through them before pulling out a purple vial and a large blue one.

"Can you find something soft to eat mate? I don't think I can do it right now," Ron admitted. "Don't tell Bill that though."

Ron's voice was barely audible. It just wasn't there anymore, but they could tell that Ron was trying to speak normally, casually. He was trying to soften them a bit before they heard everything from Bill and George. He was trying to say that 'no matter how bad it sounds please don't be angry.' It wasn't working. At all.

"Course not," Harry promised curtly.

They'd wait until they knew everything. They were both impossibly angry, but they knew not to push at that moment. They didn't know what was going on, but Ron couldn't take it. He was trembling, barely conscious, and still trying to act so casual. It pissed her off.

Harry searched through the pantries before coming across a newly raised loaf of bread. Harry lifted it questioningly. Ron nodded. Cutting it into pieces and sliding it over Ron gingerly picked up one.

There were hushed sounds of arguing coming from the living room now. Hermione flicked her wand towards the opening, silencing the noise. Noticing Ron's trembling hands she gently took the one without the slice of bread into her own. They were unnaturally cold, frozen even. At the touch Ron looked up into her eyes for the first



time since he'd arrived and the casual air he'd been trying so hard to put up crumbled.

The piece of bread fell limply onto the counter.

Ron's shoulder's shook. Leaning forward into Hermione he buried his face into the crook of her neck. She immediately pulled him forward without question. Harry was there in an instant on his other side as close as possible.

"I'm sorry I wasn't there for you guys. I'm so sorry I couldn't be here when you needed me. I didn't want to leave you. I missed you so much," Ron's near nonexistent voice whispered with such sincerity and anguish that it physically hurt her to hear it.

Her hands moved automatically to rub up and down his back in a comforting motion, but she stilled as she felt his spine even through the fabric. Her eyes shot up to Harry's in alarm and fright. Harry's pale face seemed to drain of a little more color as he reached out and touched where Hermione's hand was. Recoiling in shock she saw Harry back into the chair he'd scooted aside to be by Ron.

"Merlin Ron," Harry breathed.

When Ron didn't respond she looked down to realize that he'd fallen asleep right there. His hair, untrimmed and reaching passed his ears, tickled her collarbone.

"Should we..." Hermione began hesitantly, "should we wake him?"

"He needs to eat and drink the potions," Harry pointed out.

They were both working on autopilot. They hadn't had time to adjust or think or even so much as comprehend what they were seeing and hearing. They were simply doing what needed to be done for Ron.

"Ron... I'm sorry but you need to get up. You need to eat," Hermione whispered urgently.

Ron moaned, but blearily opened his eyes, sitting up carefully. Hermione bit her lip as she looked over to Harry. It was usually her and Ron doing this for Harry. It was strange, the silent communication, the determination and spark of protectiveness being shared between her and Harry. She'd seen Harry and Ron exchanged the look several times for her benefit, but she couldn't ever really remember a time when she and Harry had done it. Sometimes, after the fight, Ron needed to be carried, but Ron never needed to be defended during a fight or protected from others.

They were there for a while, Ron breaking the bread into small pieces, and eating slowly as if it were painful. It gave Hermione time to examine Ron without him really noticing. He kept tipping to one side unsteadily, his eyelids dripping down to meet the bruised portion of his skin sitting directly under them. Her hand subtly rubbed his back before settling around his waist in a comforting motion. She hoped she wasn't being too obvious, but she didn't want to wait for however long Ron was going to need to sleep. She needed to know, but asking him to strip for her seemed ridiculous in the current situation.

He only ate two pieces of plain bread before he swung the potions back.

"Don't you need to eat more than that?" Harry asked, anger laced with the question.

Ron tried to reply, but nothing came out. He'd lost his voice. The mouth closed with a snap. Irritation showed on Ron's face as he shrugged helplessly towards Harry. They helped Ron up the stairs to his room and sat beside his bed for a long while after the redhead had fallen asleep.

Every part of her wanted to go downstairs and throw a fit while demanding to know what was going on, but she didn't want to leave Ron just yet. It seemed Harry felt the same way. He sat at the edge of Ron's bed staring blankly at his sleeping form.

"We're all waiting for you two," Ginny's voice called from the doorway.

Hermione nodded absently. Ginny stood there, looking completely lost, avoiding peering at Ron's form. She fidgeted, obviously expected them to jump up at her announcement, and not knowing what to do when they didn't readily react. She glanced over at them once more before ducking out of view and back downstairs. The oddity of this behavior was lost of them as they were both absent in their own thoughts.

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He woke up once, hours later, and barely made it to the bathroom where he vomited pieces of bread and stomach acid. Harry came rushing in, ever the valiant knight, causing Ron to chuckle and cough. It was so familiar and comforting that it actually physically hurt his heart. He wasn't sure why.

"Go to sleep mate," Ron muttered.

Harry ignored him, sitting on the floor beside him.

"What do you need me to do?" Harry demanded.

"If I need something I'll get it. I didn't mean to wake you," Ron told him, spitting the rest of the throw up into the toilet.

"So all those times you woke me up from a nightmare and sat with me downstairs until I was ready to sleep... that meant nothing to you?" Harry questioned.

Ron blinked. Wha...?

"Well I meant something to me even if you don't care. So I think I'll stay," Harry went on.

"What the bloody fuck are you talking about Harry? Where did that come from?" Ron asked in bewilderment.

"Well it seems to me that you think our friendships a joke if you think I'd just 'go back to bed,'" Harry said mockingly.

There was an icy undertone of bitterness to that sentence. Ron inwardly cringed in wary resignation. Harry was trying to reign in his anger to be here for him. He was trying to be gentle despite wanting to scream.

"There's no use in you being up though," Ron rasped, "this is just... it's just normal. I'll go back to bed when I don't feel nauseous anymore."

"Remember that day you stayed up with me even though you had to meet up with that Auror?" Harry asked instead of answering.

Ron looked away guiltily, Harry's eyes glittering sharply in the darkness, fully aware now that, that had been a lie too. He simply nodded.

"That was normal for you too, to stay up with me or Hermione, it was normal for all three of us," Harry stated casually, eyes watching Ron closely.

He felt another wave of nausea hit him. Ron dry heaved above the already filled toilet bowl. Water sprang to his eyes to slide down his face. He wasn't sad. It was simply a bodily reaction to the vomiting. Ron gasped for breath, coughing harshly as the dry heaves slowly stopped wracking his body. A hand was rubbing his back. Looking over his shoulder he found Harry. His face looked twisted between anger, fright, and concern.

Godric Harry was trying so hard not to yell at him.

"This should have been normal too Ron, you should have..." Harry began, voice strained, "... how could you?"

Ron pushed himself up and leaned over the bathtub to turn on the tap, ignoring Harry's question for now. He wasn't strong enough to

get to the sink, but he needed to get the taste out of his mouth. Harry watched him as Ron scooped up water and rinsed his mouth out. Harry's eyes flashed.

"Stop that!" Harry snapped without thinking. He summoned a cup from the kitchen and muttered a spell that filled it to the brim with crisp, cold drinking water. He shoved it into Ron's hands before glaring at the redhead. "This is what I mean! You didn't need to do *that* ! All you had to do was ask me!"

"I don't want to wake you up for stupid stuff like this," Ron muttered into his cup, gratefully sipping at it.

"Well I don't want you to suffer for stupid stuff like this!" Harry shot back.

Pain suddenly and rapidly spread through his back. Ron tensed, hoping to ride out the wave without Harry noticing, but the green eyed teenager picked up on it immediately.

"Ron?" Harry asked in a small fearful voice.

The plastic cup was straining from his grip as he pulled it in sharply against his chest. Why was it that when a person was in pain they tended to bring their body parts as close as they could to their center? It made no sense. It gave no relief and made it more difficult for other people to help you. Ron shuddered violently, a choked gasp of pain, followed by a series of screams that were suppressed half way through.

"What do I do?" Harry asked urgently, panicked.

Ron reached out and gripped Harry's outstretched arm, the cup falling to the ground with a clutter.

"Just stay," Ron told him in a choked voice, "its... normal."

"It's normal," Harry repeated, unsteadily.

When a body slid beside him and pulled him close to him, he almost laughed. Why did people bring other people closer to them when they were in pain? It made no sense. It offered no relief from the pain. It just made you *feel* safer. It made you *feel* better. Ron shuddered violently again as another particularly painful wave ran through his back. The grip tightened.

In between these waves Ron scolded himself for being so pathetic. It wasn't Harry's job to comfort him like he was some little kid. He shouldn't want someone to hold him and especially not a guy. Two teenaged young men sitting on the floor of the bathroom with one practically having the other in their lap. It must have looked ridiculous.

He felt even more pathetic for the fact that he *liked* having Harry there for him. It was unbelievably comforting to know and feel his best friend was there. He was supposed to be kicking Harry out of the bathroom. He was supposed to be handling this on his own. He was supposed to be sitting there by himself riding out the pain while Harry went to sleep. That was the responsible, respectable, manly thing to do.

He'd have to swear Harry to secrecy on this.

That particular thought was shot to hell when another person found their way into the bathroom and sat on his other side. Curly, brown hair fell over his left side as the figure wrapped her arm around his waist. Hermione had somehow known. The whole house asleep, at least he thought they were asleep, and she somehow knew. He'd been certain that Harry had placed a silencing charm on the door when he entered. It was just like their nightmares. They just somehow knew.

Ron screamed as the largest wave of pain passed through him. Gripping tightly onto the front of Harry's shirt his entire body curled in, every muscle tensing and jerking. A soft hand forced his right hand to unclench and took it in hers. He immediately squeezed it as he arched his back. Crying out in pain even Ron's toes curled up.

"It's just cause... I had treatment... this morning," Ron croaked out at the sight of their devastated expressions. "It's not... normally this... bad."

"Liar," Hermione admonished softly, pulling him toward her gently and kissing the side of his head, "you're such a bloody liar Ronald Weasley."

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Apparently George and Bill had only explained a few things before they went to sleep the night before. They had slept just as long as Ron had and hadn't been able to tell the family much between all the yelling and screaming. So when Ron woke in the morning in his bed, he wasn't sure when or how he'd gotten there, it was to a breakfast table turned interrogation desk.

Thoroughly put off by the idea of spending yet another day arguing Ron backed up from his spot on the staircase where no one could see him.

Ron didn't make it to his room. Instead he stayed on the second flight of stairs listening in to Bill and George's voice. Every few minutes he'd hear the family ask a question, snap, or yell that would make him cringe. Eventually the act of standing there began to wear on his exhausted form. The trip really had been rather hard on him. Using the railing for support Ron hauled himself up the rest of the way.

He paused at the sound of footsteps rapidly making their way towards him before his shoulder's slumped in resignation. Harry's eyes bore into his with the silent message that he'd been patient enough. He must of heard something from Bill or George that really set him off.

It felt strange to be back in his bedroom. He hadn't really been aware when he went to sleep last night and woke up just a few minutes ago. The bed was missing, still shrunken down and inside one of his bags downstairs. He slept on Harry's guest bed last night. Sinking to

the floor he tried to ignore the eyes attempting to glare holes into his head. There was so much anger, hurt and *concern* in the bright green eyes that Ron couldn't bear to look into them or directly at the owner.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

It was a simple question, but said in such a helpless, broken voice that Ron just wanted to crawl into a corner and be left there for the rest of his life. He couldn't put it off like he'd done last night. He had to answer it. Ron stared at the owner's feet. New shoes, Auror standard, created for travel and wear. He remembered the three of them sitting in the common room debating what they wanted to be once they left Hogwarts. He'd been the one to suggest Aurorship, yet he hadn't really thought it was possible for *himself*, even before the war really got going. He probably would never wear those shoes.

"What would that have accomplished, Harry? I'd still be in the same position I am, but you two would have been a lot more stressed," Ron spoke, directing his words to the eighteen year olds shoes.

"You would have been HERE!" Harry roared angrily. "You wouldn't have had to be alone! You know we would have done everything to help you!"

"Including botching your own Auror training," Ron said quietly.

Harry stared at him blankly for a moment before he really exploded.

"You think I give a FLYING BLOODY FUCK ABOUT AUROR TRAINING? YOU'VE BEEN ALONE AND SICK IN A HOSPITAL FOR MONTHS AND YOU THINK I CARE ABOUT A FUCKING JOB!?"

Ron winced.

"It hasn't been that..."



"Don't you dare finish that sentence!" Harry hissed. "George told me you were screaming in pain from the treatment at the hospital so don't you dare lie to me."

Ron stared wearily at Harry as the young man paced back and forth across his small room like an animal.

"He told me about the letters too Ron," Harry snapped, angry and hurt, "letters to each of us in case you died. You weren't planning on telling us anything. You were gonna fucking stay there till you got better or died."

A sob broke out on the other side of the door startling both of them. Hermione had been listening in, but the sound of feet racing down the stairs told them that she was gone.

"I didn't want any of you to watch me slowly die and I didn't want any of you to have to take care of me either. That wouldn't have been fair to any of you." Ron rasped dejectedly.

"That would have been our choice Ron. You think *this* is better? Finding out that you might be dying, seeing you so ill, discovering all of your lies to cover it up?" Harry demanded harshly.

"You would have taken *my* choices away!" Ron snapped. "Just like George and Bill did when they grabbed me and forced me here. You think this is what I wanted? I didn't want to come here Harry! You weren't supposed to find out I was sick. If I told you, any of you, then you would have forced me to do it your way. That's how you guys are. I wouldn't have had a choice!"

on's voice cracked with strain. He was so tired. His breathing was becoming more ragged the longer this argument wore on. Despite just getting up he didn't feel like he'd slept at all. The family hadn't stopped yelling at him since he stumbled through the door. The treatment hadn't helped matters at all and the day before that...

Ron grimaced as a metallic taste entered his mouth. Ignoring Harry for a moment Ron pulled out a cloth from his pocket with trembling hands and spat the blood into the napkin. A soft thud sounded causing him to look up. Harry was kneeling in front of him staring at the blood in the napkin in shocked horror as if he'd only just remembered that the person he was screaming at was sick. His face had gone a deathly pale shade and his hands were shaking.

"The acid from vomiting so much and screaming causes my throat to bleed. It's not the illness Harry," Ron told him quietly with a weary smile.

"You should have told us," Harry repeated weakly.

Ron's jacket sleeve lit up. Pulling the sleeve back they both stared down as the name of the potion he needed to take along with its instructions that had appeared over the skin of his right arm and palm.

"Can you go get my bag with the potions in it Harry?" Ron asked softly.

Harry nodded slowly before standing and leaving the room. Merlin he was so tired. Looking around the room Ron shakily got to his feet and wandered over to Harry's makeshift bed for the holidays. Harry would wake him up when he got back up there.

Harry's feet felt like lead as he left the room. Moving downstairs he saw various members of the family sitting around in shocked silence. There was no idle chit chat or excitement for one of the first quidditch games to be played after the war tomorrow evening. Molly's voice didn't bark out orders from the kitchen. Charlie hadn't moved from his spot on the couch since he stumbled into the living room that morning. George and Bill were in the kitchen with Arthur speaking in hushed voices. It felt surreal. No... it felt like they'd taken a step back in time and were plotting to take down Death Eater attacks or Voldemort. None of them were sure what to do now. Going on with their holiday festivities felt morbid now.

Ginny had left early this morning, mumbling something about needing fresh air. There had been a dazed look about her and Harry wondered worriedly if allowing her to disapparate had been a wise choice, what with focus being such a large part of the process. Harry paused as he caught sight of a figure sitting outside. He automatically began moving in that direction, before stopping in his tracks. Hermione needed time to let the news sink in. He would talk to her later. He needed to get Ron's potions. Grabbing them Harry found that he couldn't move. The image of Ron upstairs froze him to the core. He found his legs felt like jello. Leaning against the wall Harry gingerly dropped the bag and put his head in his hands.

The blackish blue bruises under Ron's eyes and how his cheeks were slightly sunken in came rushing to the forefront of Harry's mind. He had known Ron for a long time and never had he seen the tall, lanky teen so *thin* . It was terrifying. The way Ron's clothes hung off as if several sizes too big when Harry had seen him fit the clothes fine just a few months back. The trembling in his hands that Harry had ignored before Ron left, but couldn't stop staring at now that he knew what it meant. More than that though... Ron had looked so defeated and broken.

All this time Ron had been fighting this illness all on his own and Harry hadn't known. He was supposed to be Ron's best friend yet he hadn't seen the signs that caused Ron to seek out medical attention. The person who he'd spent the entirety of his Hogwarts time with had been badly hurting since sixth year and Ron hadn't told him a damn thing. His best friend had been blacking out and in pain for more than a year and he hadn't *noticed* . Ron had been undergoing treatment for nearly six months and he hadn't *known*. He hadn't known about the torture Ron had endured at the hands of Spinsor and Wormtail either.

He felt so sick. Harry felt bile rising in the back of his throat. Taking deep breaths Harry shuddered. Ron had been writing *death* notes. Ron had been... was expecting the treatment to kill him. It was obvious that he had absolutely no intentions of telling anyone. He

suddenly felt rage fill him. Harry slammed both his fists as hard as he could into the floor of the hallway. There was a loud crack as one of his knuckles broke, but he hardly noticed.

He felt more than saw Molly Weasley rush into the hallway and pull him into a tight embrace. All it did though was bring back Ron's voice when he told his mother that her hug was hurting him and the look of horror on her face. He wondered how much it hurt her to not be able to hold her youngest boy like she was holding him now. Harry hugged her back and heard the woman he'd looked up to as a mother figure for so long let out a long snuffle.

"Ron needs to take a potion," Harry murmured.

He felt Molly nod. She pulled away and gripped his hand muttering a spell under her breath. Harry felt the bone heal right up.

"Harry dear... let me take it to him. Okay?" Molly choked.

He nodded not because he wanted to let her do it, but because he knew she needed to do it. She needed to take care of Ron. When Ron had essentially locked himself up in the room last night after the devastating announcement Molly had paced the house itself like Moaning Myrtle paced her bathroom. Harry wanted to help his friend too, but at this moment it wasn't his place. Something deep inside of him told him this and if there was one thing Dumbledore taught him it was that intuition was a powerful thing. He picked up the bag again and handed it to her. She gripped it tightly and held it to her chest like a lifeline.

Before Harry could blink he found himself in the living room alone. He almost wanted to laugh. She had disappeared to her son's room even after all the warnings she'd given the twins. Harry picked himself up, but felt unsure of where to go. Everywhere that wasn't Ron's room felt wrong somehow. Harry took a deep breath and entered the back garden. He said not a word, but gently stole one of Hermione's hands and held it firmly. She squeezed back.

"I sent him all those howlers." Hermione whispered. "Do you think I screamed at him when he was really hurting?"

Harry stared at her blankly. She knew the answer to that. It was Ron's fault for not telling them, but the thought of something so awful happening while Ron was puking or in pain was difficult to wrap his mind around. It wasn't her fault, but she must be feeling unbelievably guilty. They all were. Guilt had no rhyme or reason, it just was, spreading like a Dementors aura. Life had taught him that. Instead of answering he simply squeezed her hand harder. Hermione shuddered and tears slid down her eyes.

"That stupid, stupid, idiot," Hermione moaned softly.

The loud thump of Arthur walking towards them from the hall startled them in the otherwise silent house. The man stood awkwardly in the doorway for a moment before straightening and nodding to them.

"I'm going to start breakfast for everyone. Why don't you come help me in the kitchen?" Arthur asked with a strained smile.

Harry nodded.

"I'll help," Harry agreed, throwing Arthur one of his own strained smile.

Hermione shook her head in the negative. Not yet ready to enter the house.

---

"Ron, baby, you need to get up for a few minutes," Molly whispered, her voice a higher octave than normal in her attempt to appear calm.

Ron stirred before blinking up at her tiredly.

"It's the red one," Ron mumbled. "There's a dissolvable cooling charm inside my bag that needs to be placed into the vial. When it's completely dissolved the potion will turn green."

The strained rasp in Ron's voice made Molly shake, but she complied. Gently she reached out and as carefully as possible examined the instructions that had appeared on his right arm. Molly shook harder as she read. The potion was very dangerous to ingest. The cooling charm temporarily made it drinkable. The charm would wear off, but the potion would have done its job and been out of his system before then.

She was supposed to willingly help her son drink this?

Ron pushed himself up, reaching down for the bag, apparently having decided that she wasn't going to help. Molly's hand stopped his.

"I'm sorry. I've got it," Molly told him.

Ron's hand released the bag, but he didn't lie back down. She prepared the potion, before holding it up to Ron's lips. He grasped it and swung it back gulping it down without a word.

"Thank you," Ron said after a moment.

Her arms twitched, but she held back the yearning to hug him. An awkward silence ensued. Molly was still trying to digest the information of last night not to mention what had been given not even an hour ago while Ron appeared lost in how to respond to them.

"You can..." Ron trailed off hesitantly, knowing what she was thinking about. "You can still hug me mum, it's just you have to be a lot more careful. Downstairs... I know you didn't mean to hurt me like that. It's okay."

Molly nearly cried. Gently she leaned forward and wrapped her arms around him. He was incredibly stiff in her arms. There were bones poking against her as she leaned into her baby. Molly buried her face into his too defined collarbone, sniffing into the thick hoodie he wore. She could feel how thin he was.

"I would have taken care of you," Molly cried into her son's shoulder.

"I'm all grown up mum, it's time I started taking care of myself," Ron tried to explain.

"Ronnie... no one... no one, not even an adult, should be expected to do what you've been trying to do," Molly explained into her child's hair.

Wasn't that what she'd been trying to tell her children for years though? Hadn't that been what she'd been saying when they were trying to join the Order before they even became of age?

"I didn't want any of you to have to deal with this," Ron muttered tiredly against her, "It's really hard."

Molly raked her fingers through Ron's hair lovingly, fighting tears.

"That's exactly how I felt when you joined the war," Molly whispered brokenly into his ear.

Ron couldn't say anything in reply. He'd already fallen asleep against her.

---

Sitting desolately outside in the snow in a simple white dress Hermione Granger felt as if she'd temporarily shut down. She'd picked out a nice dress to wear for each day that Ron would be back. She remembered snickering with Fleur thinking how utterly clever she was. Wasn't it just like Ron to prove to her the opposite? White flakes stuck to her bushy hair and eyelashes and there was no doubt that they would soon melt and wet her hair unpleasantly. A tiny part of her mind noted all of this with little emotion and recognized the symptoms as shock.

Ron...

So much had been going on. She'd been working furiously on so many different projects. She'd been investing her time and energy on a number of high priority missions and helping to reorganize the ministry as well as helping Harry to decipher Trelawney's new prophecy. Death Eater's needed to be rounded up and taken to prison. Ministry policies needed to be rewritten to better aide the people or simply gotten rid of. Relief programs, two of which she was directly involved in creating the outlines of, had needed to be put in place.

Ron was...

Neville had been so overwhelmed. Kingsley had asked him to help create relief programs and her friend had come to her with need of advice and she'd... of course she helped. As it turned out she was very good at it too. So good in fact that Kingsley had been slowly slipping more projects in front of her and delegating Auror duties to other people. They needed her for *this* more than they needed her for *that* . She knew Harry had been upset by it, but he'd understood. She lived in the same flat with him so it wasn't like she was going away like...

All this time Ron was...

The three had essentially been separated by work. Ron had left them to go do Strategy Auror training in Australia before beginning work in the hospital down there. Harry was working hard as an Auror. She was helping to create relief programs alongside Neville. She and Harry barely had time to breathe. Ron's absence felt like an all-consuming emptiness in their lives that refused to abate. It hurt and he wasn't there. Ron promised her to always be there for her, for the both of them, and he wasn't. She knew he wanted to do the special Auror training, but she couldn't wrap her mind around *why* he suddenly changed his mind after being so adamant about staying. She couldn't understand why he was leaving them *now* when they were all hurting so badly from the war. It felt like he was running from them.



All this time Ron was so...

The letters had started out friendly enough. They were normal. She and Harry wrote Ron about how Auror training was going. They told him about Teddy and described how everyone was handling things. They updated him about how George was recovering. Harry wrote him about quidditch matches he and the others played every Sunday. She wrote about how she and Fleur were getting along well now. She wrote him about what research she was doing to help Neville. She explained all of her ideas and... He wrote back to all of them and told her his thoughts. He even gave ideas and suggestions. He told them about the training and about finding the job at the café. He told them about interning at the hospital to gain knowledge about how to help them on the field. He told them about the patients he helped. He wrote silly little stories about the little girl he'd grown attached to like a little sister. He told her all about Antea and Traux. Everything seemed fine until it suddenly wasn't.

All this time Ron was so sick...

Everything suddenly wasn't fine at all. They'd gotten a week off and wanted to come down and suddenly Ron started acting very harsh and angry towards them. She should have known. She'd been an absolute fool and allowed Ron to make her angry, angry enough not to want to talk to him. She and Harry both had started sending back angry replies and the letters between them started to get fewer and fewer. More harsh. They started to say such awful things to each other and when Ron had subtly suggested they break up...

All this time Ron was so sick and...

She'd cried herself hoarse that night sobbing into her bed after putting a silencing charm over her room. Then she'd gotten angry. She'd gotten so unbelievably angry. She'd broken a good number of her possessions and even ripped some of the pages in her books. She'd been so confused and hurt. Her heart had been wounded. The letter she'd sent back had reflected her incredulousness at the suggestion, silently questioning what was going on. When his reply

came... that almost casual, easy going reply... that awful heart wrenching and short response... What happened next had been what usually happened when she was all of those things emotions thrown together. She became very cold. She threw herself into her work and sent Ron lectures via Howlers. Because when Hermione Granger was angry she did not leave it alone. She wanted Ron to know how angry she was with him and by Merlin he would.

All this time Ron was so sick and hurting...

She never once got a reply to a single one of those Howlers. Harry had tried to make her feel better about the situation, but she'd tried to act as cold and indifferent as was possible. It didn't fool him of course. All it really did was scare the poor or homeless people she was trying to help when she talked to them. The Howlers eventually lessened but never stopped. She buried herself even more into her work and tried not to think about Ron.

All this time Ron was so sick and hurting. All these months he'd been so deathly ill and she'd been none the wiser. He'd lied to her. She thought he was off having a grand time in another country while she was hurting and confused. She'd been so angry at him. Now she wasn't sure what to feel. Standing outside that door, unsure whether to enter, listening to Harry yelling at Ron it was like Harry was screaming with her own voice.

*" Why didn't you tell me?"*

The betrayal. The Hurt. The overwhelming pain of seeing Ron like that.

*" What would that have accomplished, Harry? I'd still be in the same position I am, but you two would have been a lot more stressed," Ron spoke.*

There was so much exhaustion in those words. She wanted to scream through the door at him. She wanted to shake him and tell him that he wouldn't sound like that if he'd let them help him.

*" You would have been HERE!" Harry roared angrily. "You wouldn't have had to be alone! You know we would have done everything to help you!"*

YES! As she shook outside the door she was too choked up to do anything, but listen. She'd done nothing, but scream at Ron for months through the Howlers and she didn't have the heart to do it anymore. Not knowing everything she did now.

*" Including botching your own Auror training," Ron said quietly.*

Indignation coursed through her at this tired declaration. Did Ron honestly think for one second they...

*" You think I give a FLYING BLOODY FUCK ABOUT AUROR TRAINING? YOU'VE BEEN ALONE AND SICK IN A HOSPITAL FOR MONTHS AND YOU THINK I CARE ABOUT A FUCKING JOB!?"*

Hermione had slid down to the floor. It was as if Harry had used her energy to make that declaration. She sat outside the door and listened as they continued the argument back and forth. When Ron spoke next it didn't sound like his voice to her. It sounded small and rough.

*" It hasn't been that..."*

*" Don't you dare finish that sentence!" Harry hissed. "George told me you were screaming in pain from the treatment at the hospital so don't you dare lie to me."*

Hermione had felt like someone punched her, despite hearing those words just half an hour ago from George, it somehow felt more real here. It was just the three of them again. Confiding in each other about their worst emotions and memories.

*" He told me about the letters too Ron," Harry snapped, angry and hurt, "letters to each of us in case you died. You weren't planning on*

*telling us anything. You were gonna fucking stay there till you got better or died."*

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. A sob escape from her throat. Not ready to face either of them yet Hermione dashed down the stairs and straight into Bill's arms. She wasn't quite sure how long she stayed there, only that at some point she'd excused herself to get some fresh air.

In a snow storm.

She hardly noticed the wind whipping her hair about her face or that her fingertips were a slight bluish color. Her mind was racing with everything that had happened the last few months with new eyes. All the letters she and Harry had gotten.

*I don't need you and Harry down here right now making everything worse. You'll just be in the way. You only know a couple medical tricks and there's no bad guy to fight so just stay home and relax. I just... I really don't need to deal with you right now. Don't come down.*

*Harry, I've been trying really hard to find a way to tell you and Hermione something, but I honestly just didn't have the guts to for a while.*

*I'm staying here Harry. Hermione can look for someone else if she wants. I'm not gonna date anyone, but I'm not gonna make her wait. Tell her that.*

How could she be so *stupid* ? How could she have allowed Ron to so easily rile her up and fool her? He'd manipulated them into staying away from him. He'd purposefully kept them away because he stupidly thought it would be easier for them.

Oh God... he looked so thin and beaten. The hoodie he was wearing to keep warm had been so much larger than it should have been. He'd lost so much weight. Hermione sniffled loudly as she tried to

keep her composure, but all she could think about was how his cheek bones had never been *that* defined. All she could see were his bright blue eyes that were far too large on his face and didn't seem so bright anymore. She couldn't shake the sight his trembling hands and the deep bruising under his eyes. It was like some horrible nightmare.

And the way that Ron gripped the front of his jacket and refused to meet any of their eyes. That wasn't her Ron. The way he shied away from their touch and the unfathomable pain that had radiated off of him was not her Ron. The way he simply hadn't had the energy to argue back or retaliate against their yelling and screaming. That was most definitely not her Ron.

*" The Doctor we talked to said that the treatment is really aggressive. He has to take all these potions that cause all these horrible side effects and the treatment itself is inhuman," George's voice shook. "They were holding him down and he was screaming in pain as they performed the ritual. They couldn't even... the pain reliever potion doesn't even work because the ritual cancels it out. It lasted nearly forty minutes and he was withering on the bed in agony the whole bloody time."*

Once every two weeks. Ron had to have done that ritual a dozen times since she last saw him. He would have been taking all of those potions George explained to them. Ones that made him feel more sick than he already was; one that made him vomit, another tired, one that made him dizzy and confused, ones that caused his head to hurt. They were all necessary in order for him to survive. Hermione felt sick. Her insides were rebelling against her. Ron had been fighting for months simply to stay alive.

And what had she been doing?

She'd been working at her little job and absentmindedly sending him Howlers because she thought he deserved it.

Arms suddenly wrapped around her. Startled she looked up into George's deep brown eyes.

"Get inside the house before you cause yourself phenomena," George said sternly, but softly. "You're not helping him by doing this."

She felt her lips tremble but nodded.

His hands guided her unsteadily through the door into the house.

## Daily Struggle Ch 13

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter? We'll that's a relief. Because I would never do something like have the main protagonists name as my title. Cuts out too many options.

A/N: See profile.

### Chapter 13: Daily Struggle

Long Quote:

"What I liked about *you*, Ron!" Harry reminded him sternly.

"Oh Merlin knows!" Ron snapped. "You tell me? What the hell do I do for you, Harry? What good am I to you? What good was I then and what bloody good am I now?"

"I feel like shit and I really need a cuddle right this minute, Ron," Harry said in barely a whisper.

Ron gulped and paled all in one. He squirmed in his seat and leaned into Harry's extended arm, breath shortening and muscles tensing. His hand lifted to reach for Harry as he drew closer and Harry gripped his friend's shoulder once again and pushed him back with a proud smile.

"That's what you do for me, Ron," Harry said, almost choking with emotion. "You tear yourself in two to give me what I need the second I need it, no matter how much it might harm you in the process. You were gonna fucking hug me. You do realize what you were going to make yourself do just then right?"

-Without Walls by Solstice Muse

*Harry was tossing and turning again. Ron sighed irritably inside their dorm room from his bed. He was so tired. He'd tried turning over and*

*ignoring it, but there was a voice in his head hissing at him to get his lazy ass up and wake Harry. Ron did so, though begrudgingly. Stumbling out of bed Ron nudged Harry's tense, sweat soaked form. A fist came out of seemingly no-where and he found himself fully awake on the floor with his chest hurting. Deserved that, the voice came back to hiss, before disappearing back to where it came.*

*" Harry..." Ron hissed, rubbing his chest as he got up off the floor. "Harry wake up! It's just a dream mate, can't hurt you." More cautiously this time he shook Harry's shoulder. The slightly younger teen let out a half scream, half whimper that sent sympathy and guilt running rampant through him. "Harry!" Ron tried again.*

*" NOooooooo," Harry moaned out. Ron sighed before going over to his bed and opening up the side drawer. Inside was a small cup of cold water. He dipped his fingers into the liquid before going back to Harry and gently putting his fingers against his right cheek. Harry reacted instantly, lashing out again and Ron took a hit to the face this time. Ron cursed as he heard Harry finally stir and begin to sit up in a daze. The cold water trick always worked, but fuck it all if it didn't hurt.*

*" Ron?" Harry's voice asked, a tremor there that neither boy would acknowledge in the morning. Ron didn't respond out loud. Simply took his wand out of his pocket and cast the 'Lumos' charm. He didn't put too much power into the spell so as to not wake Neville, Seamus or Dean.*

*" Sorry I woke you up Harry. Couldn't sleep. Wanna play exploding snaps?" Ron whispered, already pulling out his set. Even as he said it he felt his eyes droop, but Harry nodded hurriedly, and that was enough to know that even if Ron was tired he wouldn't be sleeping tonight. It must have been pretty bad.*

---

When he woke up next he found that he felt both better than this morning and frigid. This time though it wasn't just him, the air itself felt chilly. Curling up into a tight ball he shuddered at the realization:



He was in England. His muscles protested fiercely when he pulled the blanket closer to himself before groggily peering around for his hoodie only to realize he was wearing it. Right. There was no warm Australia temperature to help him in his continuous search for heat. He glared at the frosted over window not too far from him. He missed magic so much. A simple spell and the room could have been toasty warm.

Rolling over so that his body was half off the bed Ron rummaged around in his bag for something else to wear, careful not to allow the blanket to fall from his shoulders, as the soft material seemed to scrape against his skin like sand paper instead of cotton. Willing his body to finish the process of dressing he waited until the very last moment, when he could no longer avoid it, to let the blanket drop and removed his jacket. He pulled on two extra shirts hurriedly before grabbing the hoodie once more and shoving it on. He still felt chilled to the bone though. Irritated Ron grabbed the blanket and wrapped it around his shoulders once more, giving the room one more look about before giving up. Wabbling to his feet he cringed as icy floors were felt though his thick woolen socks.

Trudging down the stairs Ron passed Ginny's room and paused. Should he? Ron brought his hand up to knock before quickly putting it down again. He didn't know what he'd say to her if he knocked. Besides none of this really changed anything right? He hadn't talked to Ginny on nice terms since Bill's wedding and before that it had to be the summer after fifth year. They viciously argued throughout his sixth year and he'd been gone Hocrux hunting his seventh year. During this past summer he'd done nothing, but argue with her more.

The young woman beyond that door wasn't the Ginny he'd stay up late talking to or who needed him to protect her. She was independent, fierce, bold, and unpredictable. She wasn't the shy chatter box that liked to ask him a million questions. She wasn't *his* Ginny anymore. She was Harry's girlfriend. She was Hermione's best *girl* friend. He was... just the brother she was disappointed in and angry with all the time.

Slightly bitter Ron decisively moved further away from the door and down the stairs. It wasn't like he missed her anyways. She didn't need him and he most certainly didn't need her. Waltzing into the kitchen Ron almost jumped in surprise to see Bill and Charlie sitting at the table talking in low voices.

"Uh... Hi," Ron rasped lamely.

"Good afternoon," Bill replied, tired but obviously amused.

"Preparing for an ice age?" Charlie questioned, gesturing to his get up.

Ron subconsciously brought the thick blanket further around his body.

"My pain reliever potion causes my bones to be chilled," Ron tried to explain casually.

Charlie looked away from him.

"Oh," he said, voice strained.

Ron fetched the kettle with his trembling hands, maneuvering the blanket onto his shoulders so it wouldn't fall to the ground. Seeing this, Bill got up to help.

"Sit down, I've got it," Ron muttered.

Bill frowned at him.

"You don't have to do that Ron, I'll make you some tea and lunch," Bill told him.

"I said I've got it," Ron repeated more harshly.

He filled the metal kettle with water, liquid sloshing around, as he unsteadily placed it on the stove. That's when it hit him. Ron glared down at the stove as he tried to figure out how to light it without

magic. His mother always used magic in her kitchen. He'd had an electric stove that the apartment manager had been kind enough to show him how to use, but his mother still had a coal heated one, an open fire for her to bake bread and what not. Witches and wizards didn't need electricity like muggles did. His mother could simply flick her wrist and the bread would hover just where it was needed for just the right amount of time on whatever baking sheet was required.

Breathing deeply Ron realized that there was no way to cook in his mother's house without magic. He also realized he just snapped at the only other people in the kitchen. Rather than admit that he'd been a prat Ron just continued to stare at the kettle for several long moments. His grip on the handle tightening.

This was one of the worst parts of his illness; being magicless. It wasn't just because everything was harder to do, it was because it made him defenseless. It was like one of his limbs had been cut off; his ability to defend himself, his security in knowing that if something happened he could do something about it, daily tasks becoming nearly impossible, his general ability to care for himself gone. Waking up from a nightmare he had neither his wand or Harry and Hermione. It constantly felt like he was exposed and humiliated and angry.

He was back in England though were the people he'd been avoiding since his diagnosis were just feet away and throughout the house. Now he stood there, in his home with his family and friends, those feelings were still very much there. And he was so tired of those feelings. He wanted to wake up and just feel... okay with the situation. He wanted to stop feeling so defective every time someone helped him.

Turning towards the table slowly he found Bill and Charlie staring openly at him. Charlie looked decidedly annoyed with him. Bill just sat there, waiting calmly. He knew Ron couldn't use magic. The man had been waiting for him to realize it.

"Could you..." Ron rasped, ears burning red.

"Yes?" Bill prodded gently.

Bill was making him pay for his earlier attitude by forcing him to finish the sentence. How could someone so calm and gentle be so unbearably annoying?

"I'm sorry," Ron grit out, "Can you please just..."

This wasn't a big deal. He was just apologizing for being rude. He was just asking for a drink. This wasn't a big deal at all. He just needed to keep telling himself that. Despite his silent mantra he couldn't quite quell the feeling of being pathetic and stepped on. He had to grovel for tea. He was so damn helpless he couldn't even make himself *bloody tea*.

"What's wrong?" Charlie asked.

They'd all been told what was going on, all the symptoms and things. It was just a lot of information to take in all at once. It would probably take everyone a while to realize all the repercussions of those symptoms. Bill probably only remembered because of the whole dragging his little brother home via dissaperation when his body couldn't handle it thing.

"I'm..." Ron rasped, his ears simply radiating red.

'... *a cripple who can't perform a heating charm.*'

Bill finally decided to take pity on him.

"The magical infection's weakened Ron to the point that using magic hurts him. Until the treatment's over with it's just too dangerous," Bill explained again.

Dawning comprehension reached Charlie's eyes as he turned to Ron with pity and concern.

"You can't heat the water?" Charlie half asked, half stated.

Instead of answering Ron grumpily readjusted the blanket before heading towards the door to the back garden. Bill shot Charlie a withering look.

"Didn't want bloody tea anyways," Ron muttered as he gripped the doorknob.

Bill flicked his wand, barricading the door. When the nob refused to turn Ron sent a heated glare towards Bill and Charlie.

"You think that's funny?" Ron hissed at the two, ears burning red.

"It's beyond freezing out there Ron," Bill started.

"It's not particularly warm and fuzzy in here either!" Ron snapped.

"And whose fault is that?" Charlie growled incredulously.

Ron's mouth opened and closed before he angrily stomped into the living room away from them. Bill put his head in his hands and breathed in deeply before squinting his eyes at Charlie.

"He started it," Charlie grossed.

"How very mature," Bill drawled.

"Should I go after him?" Charlie asked. Bill looked up in surprise to see his little brother looking towards the living room in uncertainty.

"I think that would be a good idea," Bill told him in his 'you're this close Charlie... don't push it' voice.

Charlie groaned, but got up. Peering into the living room he found himself almost cracking a smile. Ron had sat on the floor and pulled Teddy into his lap. The baby squealed in delight as the redhead blew lightly against his cheek. Small hands reached up to touch Ron's cheek before drawing back in shock, turning red hair a bright icy blue, fascinated by the cold skin Teddy gingerly touched Ron again

and smiled gummily up at him. Ron brought both the babies hands up to his face and closed his eyes.

"Stop taking the babies warmth. You'll give him a cold," Charlie joked, sitting down next to Ron.

Ron stiffened, putting the babies hands down, who pouted up at them from his spot.

"What do you want?" Ron rasped, keeping his voice calm, so as not to scare the baby.

Charlie put his arm around Ron in a one arm hug and pulled him towards him to try to warm him up more. He could feel his emaciated brother shivering in his hold, it felt like he was cuddling up to an icy skeleton. Stubborn to the end, Ron still had a scowl on his face. Teddy gurgled happily, his little bum plopping on top of each of their legs so close to each other, before reaching up and tugging at Ron's unruly mop of hair. Surprisingly Ron didn't protest the sharp jerks, but rather made faces at the baby who giggled.

"Look Ron, come get some tea to warm yourself with before Bill tries his hand at it. You know he's the only one who can make tea taste burnt. If you come now I'll make it for you with lots of honey," Charlie told him.

"Bribery?" Ron asked half in scorn and half in amusement. "Am I five Charlie? I'll get tea later."

"You leave me no choice Ronnie, you've forced it on yourself!" Charlie declared.

"What the bleedin' hell are you..."

Charlie shoved his arms under his brother's legs and behind his back eliciting a very manly yelp from the eighteen year old. Bending his knees and heaving the dragon tamer lifted both brother and baby off the ground. It was startlingly easier than he'd anticipated, even

knowing how much weight Ron had lost the last few months. His back creaked unpleasantly, but the outraged indignation on Ron's face was completely worth it... or it would be... in a week or two...

"You bloo..."

"Baby!" Charlie cried out loudly as he brought Ron through the doorway back into the kitchen.

"He can't understand a word I'm saying you overgrown twit! Put me down!" Ron demanded in a cracking rasp, arms wrapped around Teddy tightly, who thought the game they were playing was absolutely *thrilling* .

"That's not what I meant Charlie," Bill barked, eyes nervously watching.

Charlie shrugged in response as he set Ron back down in his seat.

Ron turned away from him, thoroughly okay with the idea of ignoring Charlie for the rest of the day. The eldest gave a long, exhausted sigh before standing up to retrieve the kettle Ron abandoned. Bill only just lifted the tea bags from the cabinet when they were interrupted.

"You're awake!" Molly exclaimed as she walked into the kitchen. "You must be hungry. Move over Bill dear. I've got that. Earl grey dear? I'll cook you up a nice meal. You probably haven't had a decent one in forever, right Ronnie? You didn't even eat breakfast!"

"Mum... I don't want anything big. Please," Ron begged, his stomach constricted at the thought.

"Nonsense! You barely even ate anything last night!" Molly announced as she flicked her wand.

"Mum, I won't be able to eat it," Ron tried.

"There are these wonderful dumplings that Mrs. Grenal showed me the other day. The sauce you dip them in was so unique and flavorful. I've got the recipe on the living room table," Molly muttered the last part to herself.

"I don't need the sauce," Ron hurriedly shouted after her. 'Flavorful' sounded more like 'overpowering and nausea inducing.'

---

The dumplings were difficult to swallow, but his mum was looking at him with such an expectant and concerned air that he at least tried. It had been a long time since she'd looked at him like that. He honestly wasn't sure how to react. Each of the dumplings was about the size of a snitch and there was a lot of them. Ron took a long sip from his hot tea trying to soothe his throat before smashing one of the dumplings down into manageable bites. One hand stayed holding the blanket while the other carefully brought up a small bite to his mouth and swallowed it. It hurt. The piece was sticky and wouldn't go down his swollen throat and his stomach protested against it even though he'd ignored the sauce she'd made. He took another long drag from his tea, before flashing his mum a smile.

"So... um... you've got a new blouse," Ron awkwardly rasped, trying to drive her hawk like attention away from how much he was eating. "I like it. It's very... um... you," he finished lamely. It was sincere. It was the first new blouse he'd seen on her in a long time. A chocolate brown, long sleeved shirt with green buttons down the middle that Hermione had once told him were colors girls wore during the fall. Bill made to rub his elbow into the side of Ron's body, but stopped midway with a guilty expression on his face. Charlie was adamantly shoveling some of the dumplings in his mouth, avoiding the awkward conversation.

Molly glanced down at the shirt, before her lips twitched.

"Ronnie, have I ever told you how I love to hear you talk?" Molly asked with a fond tone. Taken by surprise Ron gave her a bewildered look, eyebrows raising to hide behind his shaggy hair.



"You sound just like your father. In fact he said nearly the same thing the first time he tried to ask me out," Molly explained.

"Oh gross," Ron groused, "I'm never complimenting your clothes again."

From the living room there was a loud snore. Startled Ron leaned back in his chair to look into the living room. To his bewilderment there Teddy was, fast asleep in Ron's blanket, with a pig's nose in place of his small human one. It caught him so off guard to see Tonk's sleeping habit on her son that he found himself nearly falling off his chair in deep chest filled laughter.

"When did he start doing that?" Ron questioned, voice rough from laughter.

She chuckled, looking down into her own teacup with a lost expression. The plate moved forward touching his arms. Ron threw Bill a 'don't you dare' glance before pushing the plate away from him as subtle as possible. Molly's eyes had followed the movements though causing Ron to look away guiltily.

"What's wrong? Why aren't you eating?" Molly asked, nervousness surfacing on her features.

"It tastes delicious mum. Nothing's wrong," Ron rasped in a placating tone.

"Then why aren't you eating?" She demanded.

"I am eating," Ron replied, taking another small bite and forcing himself to swallow. His stomach rolled, but he fought back the gag reflex.

"Ronnie... dear if you don't like it..."

"Mum! Its' *fine*," Ron groused.

Molly tutted, worry evident in her eyes as she continued to watch him. Suddenly feeling dizzy Ron laid his head down on the table and closed his eyes.

"Ronnie?!"

"Merlin... 'm fine," Ron moaned.

"Convincing," Bill muttered, but there was amusement in his voice.

He heard his mother hum lightly to herself as she washed up several dirtied dishes. Bill and Charlie moved around the table and to his utmost annoyance he felt them hovering. Ron turned to look at them and sighed.

"Its' Christmas holiday guys... go play quidditch or shop or something," Ron rasped, making a shooing motion with his good hand.

"We could... is there anything you'd like to do?" Bill asked.

*' Is there anything you can do?'*

"It's too soon after treatment Bill. I'm a useless lump of raw nerves for at least two more days. Just go and enjoy yourselves. You're doing nothing, but making me feel bloody guilty," Ron rasped.

"Language!" Molly snapped.

"Sorry mum," Ron said, rolling his eyes towards Bill and Charlie who both looked relieved for some reason. Maybe they'd been looking for an excuse to get away for a while now.

"Alright, we'll play a game of chess tonight then, sound good?" Charlie asked, ruffling Ron's hair.

"Sounds delightful," Ron drawled.

"Hopeless," Charlie muttered, but the twinkle in his eyes as he dragged his jacket on said otherwise.

"We're meeting the girls at the market in Diagon Alley then," Bill announced. "Three days to Christmas and they're still picking up things. Want to come mum? George and Percy should be there soon too since they get off work in an hour or so."

"I'm fine, sweetie. Got everything finished up already," Molly said.

"Get off work? I thought it was only around twelve," Ron muttered, looking towards the clock. Sure enough it was already nearly four. Great. He had to take the potions that made him feel nauseous at four-thirty. Ron brought the leftover dumplings over to him again. He'd have to get at least a little bit more down and hope that it got far enough into his system that he wouldn't be making a reacquaintance with the stuff later on tonight.

"You slept for quite a while dear," Molly told him in a carefully casual manner. There was an edge to her voice though, too high to be natural. She seemed to look around the kitchen for a distraction, humming thoughtfully at the snowflakes hit the window. "Looks like it's going to be another dark, cold night." She flicked her wand, lighting her favorite candles so that the scent wafted through the air and warmed the atmosphere. Then started the living room fire place going. He recognized the candle's scent immediately in a few different ways. The first thought was that it was his mother's favorite; vanilla. The second thought though... was that it wasn't going to be necessary to take the potions to see the dumplings again.

The scent threw his insides into revolt. It hit him hard and fast and so unexpectedly that he knocked his mug of tea over in his dash to the kitchen sink. If they had hurt going down the chunks of dumplings forcibly coming back up only half digested, felt like gravel against his raw throat. Molly was there in an instant rubbing his back, eyes startled, as Ron gaged and puked. His fingers clenched against the sink as he braced himself for the convulsions that wracked his chest.

"What's wrong?" Molly demanded.

Ron shook his head, bewildered himself. His mother's candles had never bothered him before. He'd loved them as a kid. Breathing in another strong scent of the vanilla hit him harder than before. Images flashed through his head. He felt like he was suffocating and a familiar pain seemed to throb from his left hand. Hands reached for him. Holding him down. He covered his mouth trying to keep the food down before gesturing vaguely around him. He leaned forward into the sink as he tried to stop his body from trembling. It wasn't just a sick feeling. He felt fear. He felt terrified and he didn't know why. He needed his wand. He needed it now.

Another wave of vomit forced itself from him as he stood over the sink. He felt inside of his jacket pocket, gripping his wand tightly in his clean, hand. Further down he felt the Deluminator and picture. He looked around the room, trying to figure out what the hell had happened. It couldn't be the candles. There was no reason to fear candles for fucks sake. But there was this voice in his head screaming at him that he needed to get out and go. All his instincts were demanding that they leave right then and there. Something was very wrong. His family was in danger. Harry and Hermione were in danger.

"Mum, we need to go," Ron rasped, spitting out the rest of the vomit.

"Go? You need the hospital?!" Molly shrieked.

"We need to get out now! We need to leave the house now! Something's really wrong," Ron told her urgently.

"Right," Molly nodded, trusting her son. "Harry's upstairs. I'll get him. Grab Teddy." With that she disappeared on the spot. Ron rushed into the living room and, with quite a bit of adrenaline to boost him, picked the sleeping baby up. Teddy didn't wake as Ron entered the kitchen once more to see Harry and Molly already there. Harry with his broom in hand stood tall and ready, a bag Ron recognized as his very own slung over the shorter teens shoulders.

"Mrs. Weasley take Teddy to the Ministry where Arthur's at," Harry hissed. "We'll take my broom." She did so without question, absentmindedly sending a charm to blow out all the candles and the fire place as she grabbed Teddy, and turned on the spot. Harry peered out the window cautiously before moving his fingers in a 'come' gesture. They didn't need to talk. Running from Death Eaters while destroying Hocruxes for months on end had taught them how to communicate silently when need be. Ron moved to the other side of the door, body almost giving in to sag against the steady frame at his back. The tip of Harry's wand glowed bluish purple from a parameter spell. It shined brightly indicating there was no trouble around, but Ron's heart still beat like it was going to explode. Every ounce of his instincts were telling him that they needed to get away.

They moved at the same time. Mounting the broom and slamming the door open they burst through and went head long into the storm. Ron closed his eyes tightly against the harsh wind. He suddenly felt ten times worse outside in the cold. Harry's arms kept him steady though. Ron looked around them, expecting a Death Eater to pop out of nowhere, something was going to happen. Ron forced himself to keep checking, to keep looking out around them, cursing the fact that he couldn't do more than simple spells at the moment.

Nothing did happen though.

Not a thing.

Throughout the trip Ron had difficulty staying on the broom. He felt dizzy, far more than when he'd been on the ground, but Harry's arms just wrapped tighter around him to make sure nothing happened. They landed safely outside an apartment complex. Harry immediately pulled one of Ron's arms over his shoulder as they dismounted and helped him through the enchanted wall. The boy who lived muttered several unlocking spells before they moved further into the building and up to a door Ron very vaguely recognized. More spells were uttered, using unveiling tricks that only the trio themselves knew. They'd been specially designed by

Hermione. When he was brought to a couch Ron practically embraced it as a long lost friend.

"What happened?" Harry demanded.

"Something was really off Harry," Ron told him. "This 'ill sound stupid, but all of a sudden I just felt like something awful was about to happen." Ron shook his head, embarrassed, but not remorseful. "It felt like... you know those few times we we're almost caught by Death Eater's? When we were camping out and just felt like we needed to move and then discovered the buggers nearby while we packed?"

Harry nodded slowly, eyes considering, never damning him for the actions they'd just made. It was such a relief. He remembered waking up from nightmares in the hospital with the same feeling, but instead of listening to him they held him down. Told him nothing was wrong. They wouldn't let him touch his wand. They wouldn't let him defend himself in any way. They just held him down as he screamed.

Harry hadn't said anything yet. His face was carefully blank and that was never a good thing. Ron fidgeted. His head hurt like crazy and his scars burned unpleasantly around his body. The distinctive ache was back meaning that their stunt had pushed his body to the point that the pain medication wasn't strong enough to dull it. Ron put his head in his hands.

"Did I just fuck up?" Ron asked.

"No," Harry answered quickly. "How many times did that save us? How many times did our instincts get us out of what could have been it for us? If we stop trusting ourselves then it's over."

"It's already over. The war is over Harry," Ron said.

"Too many Death Eaters haven't been captured. Too many people still want us dead for it to be over. You know that," Harry told him sternly.

"I know. That's what people keep telling me though."

Harry smiled at him, it was a worn, understanding smile that spoke a million things to each other. The first since he'd arrived back home.

"I'll send a patronus to the others and a few of us will check out the Burrow more thoroughly," Harry announced. Ron opened his mouth to tell him about the candles, but stopped himself just in time. Harry began to relay his message to the stag while Ron sat there considering what happened.

' *Fucking candles... what am I a lunatic?* ' Ron groused to himself.

The candles had to have been a coincident with the moment he sensed something. That had to be it. There was no way he got everyone riled up over candles.

"Where are we anyways?" Ron asked, as Harry sat down beside him.

"Our apartment," Harry answered tiredly.

"Ah," Ron said looking around. It indeed was the apartment that they'd picked out. The one that Harry and Hermione lived in and that he'd been supposed to live in and that Harry thought he would live in. "Harry," Ron began hesitantly, "You know I can't... there's no way I could live with you right? If I'm not gonna live at the Burrow and have *them* take care of me I'm not gonna let you two go through all that."

"You act like helping you take potions and taking you to the hospital for treatments is some nightmare," Harry snapped. "Was being friends with me in my hard times terrible too? In case you've forgotten *Ron* it was me who dragged you to the Ministry where you were attacked by that thing in the first place! You're sick because of me!"

"Who told you my illness was from the creature?" Ron demanded.

"The sickness originated in your scars right? I'm not an idiot mate," Harry sighed, sagging into his chair.

"That was more of my own bloody fault though wasn't it?" Ron stated more than asked, trying for a light, joking tone. "Summoned the damn thing right to me."

"Because a Death Eater hit you with a nasty curse that not even Pomfrey was able to identify," Harry said quietly.

Ron nudged Harry with his elbow, making sure that Harry was looking directly at him, and therefore hearing what he had to say.

"Come on mate... don't go all depressed and blaming yourself, huh? I've had quite a good amount to last me a life time from you. The illness isn't anyone's fault. It just is," Ron rasped.

"That's right," Harry agreed, keeping eye contact, "And it isn't your fault either Ron. There's no reason to punish yourself like this trying to prove a point or protect or whatever it is that you've got stuck in that head of yours. We've got the room and we'll make time."

"That wasn't really the deal we had though was it?" Ron pushed. "We would each pay for one-third of the bills. We'd each do laundry and dishes and the like. I can't be a freeloader Harry I can't."

Harry seemed to deflate at that.

"Just let your damn pride go for a moment Ron, please," Harry begged. "I didn't sleep last night at all you know? Not after I woke up to you vomiting. I've been having Kreacher come to the apartment to help us out a bit, get him out of that dreary place, and what not. He could help us out and we'd be fine. We need you mate."

Ron felt warm at that, but what could he possibly do for them? Ron opened his mouth, but the sound of footsteps coming towards the door stilled him from saying anything. They stood, Ron leaning heavily against Harry's shoulder as they moved away from the door



and waited with baited breath from around the corner. Hermione came bursting through trailed not quite so quickly by George and Ginny. Heaving heavy breaths Hermione spotted them immediately as they stumbled out of their spot. She threw herself at them and pulled their heads down so fast towards her shoulder's that Ron had to blink a few times to get his eyesight back.

"What in the world happened?" Hermione demanded in a harsh whisper.

"We need to check around the Burrow," Harry answered, giving Hermione a look, "there's a good chance that we'll find something amiss."

George sighed in exasperation as he collapsed onto the couch.

"You mean like when Hermione swore she recognized a Death Eater outside of the Ministry following her home or when you insisted for three days that we needed to keep six different security enchantments on our doors because you had a *feeling* that something bad was going to happen?"

Ginny too seemed beyond weary.

"You also can't stand sleeping in different rooms than Hermione three nights out of the week. Hermione doesn't like that we leave our windows open. When we send letters to one another you insist that important information needs to be kept out," Ginny said quietly.

"It's better to be safe than sorry," Hermione murmured. A blush, so unlike her, spread deeply across her cheeks.

"We understand that you three were deeper into the war than many of us were. We understand that you were in the midst of fighting and destroying pieces of you-know-who's soul, but that's why we want you to consider going to a mind healer, you know?" George, unusually subdued, suggested.

"Mind Healer?" Ron muttered incredulously.

"We're not paranoid. We're not broken or anything like that. We just know when something's not right!" Harry argued fiercely. Apparently this was an argument that they'd had many times before. Ron felt cold, more than just the medicine and weather this time. "Hermione caught three different Snatchers a week ago and I've caught five Snatchers and a Death Eater just this month." Ron felt the bottom of his stomach drop. "Hermione had a Death Eater in disguise try to murder her a month ago. I've had a couple different attempts on my life too. It's only because we've kept a watch out that nothing bad has happened." And there went his heart and lungs just then... right out of his arse they fell so hard and fast.

"What?" Ron blurted, eyes wide.

"But no one's attacked the Burrow Harry... we've got protection spells all over the place and this is the fourth time one of you three has sent us running," George pointed out gently. "Ron's obviously no better off than you two have been. Merlin knows what he's put the hospital through."

"We just want you to consider it okay?" Ginny said weakly, backing off a bit. "What the mind healer called it... Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder or what not... it sounds right. It doesn't mean you're crazy or paranoid it just means your hurt and need to talk about it." She wouldn't look at any of them directly.

"We talk about it," Hermione murmured softly in defense. Her head was buried in Ron's chest, arms wrapped loosely around his waist. It was the closest they'd been since he'd gotten back. His arms twitched to wrap around her body and bring her closer, but there was a war going on inside his head. Hadn't he called things off with her? He had if he remembered the letters, but it almost felt like the reveal took back those words.

But she was still one of his best friends.

Ron gingerly brought his arms around her shoulders, putting his head on top of hers. They'd work it out later. She needed him. His eyes met George's.

"To each other," George pointed out quietly. "I've... been trying it. It helped me to stop... to stop drinking and get my head out of my arse to see what I was doing wasn't gonna make me feel better about... about Fred."

Ron flinched inwardly at the mention of the name, a name he hadn't heard spoken in as long as he'd been gone, before outwardly pushing Hermione gently away and striding over to his older brother.

"You been making sure to tell her about all his assholish qualities too right?" Ron ribbed. "Not filling their heads with ideas that he had light shining out of..."

"Ron!" Ginny snapped, spitting fire.

George was looking at him though with a twinkle in his eyes.

"Ronniekins you should know that Gred never committed anything so terrible as you seem to be suggesting," George announced incredulously.

The air in the room grew still, though Ron wasn't sure why.

"Puh... bet he's up there tricking people out of their money for your junk right now."

George sputtered.

"Junk?!"

Ron felt a wave of dizziness, he gripped George's shoulder to keep his balance, before forcing a savage grin onto his face.

"Junk," Ron repeated.

George opened his mouth to respond when Ron's arm lit up for the room to see.

"Which one is it?" George asked, the mischievous smirk wiped off his face.

"The green one that makes sure the infection doesn't go any further into my organs and bones," Ron answered. Harry bent down and picked up the back pack they'd grabbed on their way out. Rummaging through it until he pulled out a potion bottle. Without a word Ron popped it open and shot it back.

"What are the side effects for this one Ron?" Hermione asked gently. Ron ignored her, sitting heavily on the couch, laying his head on top of his arms.

"Ronald!" Hermione demanded.

"Fatigue and makes me nauseous," Ron rasped mechanically.

"Just let him sleep," Ginny told Hermione sternly. Ron stirred a bit at the sound of her voice. It was the first time he'd heard his little sister's voice since he'd arrived.

"Hermione and I are gonna round up Bill and Charlie to check out the Burrow. Stay here with him won't you?" he heard Harry ask.

That was the last sounds he heard.

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Ginny let Harry and Hermione run off to check the Burrow. There was nothing there. She knew there wouldn't be anything there. Harry was her boyfriend. Hermione something that she would call one of her best friends. Ron was her big brother. She'd seen though. Seen how they ran themselves ragged from ghosts of the war. Even though she trusted them unquestionable she knew they'd all been badly damaged from their fight against Death Eaters, Snatchers and Voldemort.

She'd *thought* that Harry and Hermione were a lot more damaged than Ron though. She'd honest to god believed that. Ron dragged them out to go places. Ron yelled at reporters. Ron didn't have as many nightmares as Harry or Hermione. He was more put together than the other two were. He didn't seem as shaken. He didn't seem as distraught over Fred as the rest of them were. He read the papers and guffawed about what lies or stories they'd come up with this time. He negotiated with Kingsley. Went on dates with Hermione... something that Harry hadn't really even talked about with her yet.

Hermione had been *tortured*. Harry had been killed and come back and defeated *Voldemort* ! Ron abandoned them in the middle of their journey. He just fucking *left*, the coward. It didn't matter what Ron had done to make up for it. What he'd done before hand or suffered under previously because he had done it. It had been difficult for her to forgive him for that when she'd been told about it first. Eventually though she'd accepted it because Harry and Hermione had. This though... leaving them behind to go off to some special Auror training. Just leaving out of the blue for no reason and where Harry and Hermione had been so broken over it, so hurt and unforgiving, it had been like the end of the line. These were Ron's best friends and he'd just dropped them like they meant *nothing* .

Yet Harry and Hermione still had this hopeful air about them. Like it wasn't true. It only further cemented her feelings, giving justification to them, fueling the flames. Then George and Bill had left to drag him over to the house for Christmas break after the utter asshole refused to come. How dare he refuse to see Harry and Hermione after everything they'd done for the pig, for that cowardly no good brother of hers. And then Ron came stumbling through the door in shambles instead of marching like a well put together soldier ready for an argument. And Ron clearly couldn't handle an argument. And words were being flung around like 'medicines' and 'illness' and 'treatment' and... and 'dying.'

And why was Ron dying? Oh God why was her big brother dying? And she felt so bipolar because just an hour ago she'd been filled

with hate towards him. Ron had left and not come back so that Harry and Hermione wouldn't have to deal with him while he was... but there was a chance. There was a forty percent chance he'd live through the treatment and if he did he'd come back, but not until after all the hard stuff was over with. And her indignant righteous anger fizzled out and was replaced by condemnations.

How could she? Why wouldn't he...? And of course she knew the answer to that, didn't she? She damn well knew why he hadn't said anything to her about it. They tolerated each other when they had to, but they hadn't talked in years. They'd flung judgments at each other all throughout sixth year and hadn't really interacted much before that. They talked sure, but about nothing important.

Now she just sat there on the couch across from him forty eight hours after he'd been forced through the doors by Bill and George and had yet to say anything to him yet. She stared at his face planted in his arms on the couch. The dark blackish/yellowish bruises that faded into pale skin. The bruises were so far reaching underneath his eyes that none of his freckles showed. And her brother had cheek bones? Merlin's beard they showed so distinctively. His entire frame seemed to resemble a bag of bones awkwardly fitted into overlarge clothes. She remembered her mother, when she was about seven, mumbling about taking Ron into St. Mungo's once. Ron had always been 'too skinny' and no one was surprised when the mediwitch said his metabolism was far higher than what was normal. It hadn't been a big deal back then. Just pile a few more potatoes on his plate, give him a little more soup than the others. Now though it was frighteningly obvious what such a diagnostic meant when Ron was this sick.

She'd been avoiding him like the plague, but now unintentionally stuck with him in this room she couldn't simply walk out of it. It wasn't like when the house was full and there was always someone in the room. She would feel so guilty just... leaving him here. Did he even want her anywhere near him though? Ginny felt her lip tremble before she buried her face in her hands and let the first beginnings of

a sob escape. Warm big hands encircled her and for a brief hopeful moment she thought it was Ron.

It was George. She'd forgotten he was there. George forced his way onto the couch so that they were squeezed together. He said nothing, simply stroking her hair comfortingly as she sobbed uncontrollably. Her eyes wouldn't dry and much to her horror she felt snot dripping down onto George's shirt. After a long while her breathing finally came under control and she pushed away from George hurriedly, wiping her eyes with her sleeve, and standing up to stare at the far wall as she cleaned up as best she could. Behind her George chuckled sadly, a silent understanding that this wouldn't leave the room, that she could trust him. She'd had a lot of moments like these with her brothers. With Fred.

Not so many with Ron though. She always felt like she was in a competition with him; for their parent's attention, for stuff, for friends, for their brother's attention. Most of the time she won. Then he went to Hogwarts and it suddenly wasn't a competition. Her parents showed her too much attention, her brothers had all eyes on her when they came, she got all the stuff and had all the friends in the neighborhood. When she finally got to Hogwarts Harry and Hermione, Ron's friends, didn't want anything to do with her. They were Ron's friends not hers.

She'd been filled with jealousy and even when Ron approached her during the year she didn't want anything to do with him. The Harry Potter saved her with Ron being left behind some silly wall and she thought that she'd be let into the group then, but she wasn't. Instead Ron had simply embraced her in a tight hug and patted her on the head like she was a *child*. He'd watched her all summer long and asked her a million times if she needed anything until she wanted to slap him. Harry and Hermione didn't approach her much though, except for the random 'how are you?'

They're relationship got better again around her third year, but it still wasn't the same as before Ron left. Ron had become more hostile and on edge than when they lived together. He was more willing to

defend himself against her demands and less likely to do what she wanted and there weren't any parents around to tell him otherwise. And he kept secrets with his friends, like Fred and George did, like Percy did all by his lonesome. Ron wasn't the same person and she didn't particular like the person he'd become.

In forth year she felt a bit of her older brother return when she joined Dumbledore's Army. He stood on level grounds with her as they learned defense tricks from Harry. They talked and joked and hung out together like they were *all* friends. Ron outsmarted Draco and the others, took them out, and then led them to Harry and Hermione like it was a walk in the park. Then he stood up for them to go to the Department of Mysteries and she'd been so thrilled to be a part of it all. Until they got there.

Ron had been taken out first. He'd been dueling one second and then just... down the next. And then in his cursed state he'd so stupidly summoned the brains to him that wrapped around him and she thought it was going to kill him. The things mouth opened wide with large sharp teeth snapping at her brother and she'd not known what to do. She'd had this high expectation that he and Harry would protect her. Once again though Ron had failed to even make it to the end. She'd broken her ankle and instead tried her damnest to save *him* . She and Neville cursed the creature with everything they knew, but the words forming its tentacles kept tightening and Ron kept screaming in such agony. Tonks had finally arrived and repelled the thing leaving Ron bleeding from his arms and back still screaming. They'd had to hold him down as the wounds smoked, it had looked like acid was burning them still, as Tonks performed healing charm after healing charm.

And Ron had changed again. He was having nightmares every night in his room and wasn't as willing to talk or hang out with her. He still did talk and hang out, but it wasn't as relaxed as before or natural. Then her fifth year had arrived and she'd gotten her first boyfriend and she and Ron seemed to be arguing over every little thing. He



wasn't talking any more. He was just being a plain ass now. He seemed to always be in a foul mood.

And now... 'The origins of the illness come from the creature that attacked him during his fifth year in the Department of Mysteries. A dark magical infection that ate away at his bones and organs. If they'd been able to detect it earlier then the illness would never have become this serious. As it is his body's been slowly degrading since the attack.'

How the *bloody fuck* had she missed that? How could Harry and Hermione miss it? How had Madam Pomfrey missed it? How had the whole of Hogwarts missed it for a full year before he disappeared with Harry and Hermione for another? Two years Ron had been suffering under this horrifying dark magical infection and no one except Ron knew about it. For the last forty eight hours those thoughts had been running rampant through her mind not allowing her to sleep or eat or do anything but wonder. She needed to know. She'd confronted Harry about it already, but the boy who lived had been just as lost as she. He didn't know how they'd missed it. Couldn't think of anything that would have pointed to it. Then a light had entered Harry's eyes and she'd demanded to know what he was thinking.

*" Mind Healers," Harry said, triumph flickering across his face.*

*" What?" She remembered asking in bewilderment.*

*" It was a recommendation of Neville's for war victims," Harry explained hurriedly. "To have pensives available to Mind healers so that they could go in and examine a memory that traumatized them or hurt them. Neville reasoned that they'd be able to see from an outside view how the situation looked. It helps people to see things from a different perspective."*

*" But what does that have to..." Ginny began confused.*

*"Six year... well fifth year for you, you two weren't on the best of terms right? You can reexamine a memory and see if there was something you missed. You can even follow Ron if your body is a certain distance away even if it's into another room."*

*She'd kissed him then, long and hard.*

Blinking rapidly out of her thoughts Ginny looked back at George and felt her resolve harden.

"George?"

"Hm?" he hummed as he placed a large, thick blanket over Ron.

"That mind healer you went to? Can you tell me where the place is located?"

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It was nearly ten o'clock at night. George had, at Ginny's insistence, dug into his contacts and pulled several strings in order to get someone that very same day. He'd found someone. A workaholic Percy like Mind Healer who strictly followed the rules and therefore would not say a word about what when on in the memories to anyone. The young woman began their session by explaining to Ginny what her every twitch meant, but hadn't hit the mark yet. `

It could have waited. It honestly could have, but she'd been a nervous wreck filled with pent up energy. She needed to do something. She was quidditch captain for Merlin's sake and that position spoke volumes in every area of her life. She hadn't been able to sit back and let Harry fight in the war. She'd wanted to join in it, going so far as to try and steal the sword with Neville by her side from Snape. Stuck in a position where there was nothing she could do she felt a need to dig. So... yes it could have easily waited until Christmas was over. There was no real urgent reason to drag the Mind Healer out of bed, but it felt productive and more than anything else it meant that she didn't have to confront Ron himself about it. She'd been long gone before Ron woke up.

So she was in the office kneeled over a pensive, viewing her memories, across from a woman who'd not gotten anything about her right so far. She was thoroughly happy she was only using this woman to examine her memories and not to psychoanalyze her. She'd felt awful about leaving Ron there, but she didn't think Ron would be particularly reassured if he woke up and she was there. He hadn't even looked at her the entire time they'd been in the same room. He looked at George and Harry and Hermione, but his eyes had avoided hers.

Ginny nervously looked around her. She expected Ron to come after her at any moment. Which was ridiculous, considering how sick he was, practically unconscious on the couch back at their flat. The mind healer walking through the memories beside her had been very consoling about Ginny's unease, continuously assuring her that Ron didn't know about her looking at memories of the two of them. It was just her and the mind healer. Pretending it was Percy beside her made it much easier to accept the superior tone without snapping at the woman.

This ability to follow Ron passed her own memories to his private moments when he thought he was alone had not led to the answers she'd been looking for though. So far all it led to was one very awkward moment of her brother wanking in the bathroom, a visit to the library to research potions for Slughorn's class, a very sweet talk with Dobby where Ron gave the house elf one of his scarves because it was cold outside (if she wasn't secretly doing this she never would have let Ron live that one down), and one event after an argument with her where he broke three knuckles punching the wall. There was no signs of Ron's illness through her memories at all. Ron was eating as much as usual. He wasn't vomiting or struggling. How could there be nothing?

At the moment they were at the quidditch pitch. She remembered this one vividly. Ron had been foul to everyone that practice. Hollering accusations and curses towards them and getting worse and worse at keeping the balls out of the ring. Harry had already

snapped at him twice. She watched as her slightly younger self grabbed one of the beaters clubs and slammed a bludger Ron's way. He easily dodged, but gave her a withering look.

"Enough!" Harry hollered. "Practice is over for the day. I *suggest* some of us get our tempers under control."

Ginny watched, more annoyed than anything, as Ron sent a glare Harry's way. Then he did it. Ginny jerked to attention as she saw Ron grip his left arm tightly. Ron turned his face away from the team, his scowl morphing into a grimace of pain. The killing blow for her was that her younger self was in a position to see, but was so angry she wasn't looking. Ron's broom literally dropped several feet from seemingly nothing. A flicker of panic crossed Ron's eyes, before he forced himself to scowl and turned back to the team.

"Yeah... whatever," Ron ground out, before immediately descending. Her younger self seemed to puff up in rage, as if she were a bird whose feathers were ruffled. It was a little embarrassing. Instead of listening to her younger self rage, she followed Ron down and through the boy's locker room with the mind healer right on her trail.

Ron stumbled off his broom, hand to his head, and tears brimming at his eyes but not quite falling. Ginny hovered around him, startled by the great contrast of seconds prior. Ron threw open a curtain, before pulling it closed behind him. The mind healer, why didn't she know her name? Watched sadly as Ron slid down the wall of the small shower to sit in a puddle. Ron seemed to be torn between gripping his left arm and trying to ease the intense headache he was suffering under.

"Ronnie?" Ginny whispered quietly as she kneeled down beside him.

"He can't hear you," the mind healer told her firmly.

Ron brought his knees up to his chest, burying his head in his knees while gripping his left arm. He was trembling.

"Ronnie go to Madam Pomfrey," Ginny urged.

It suddenly hit her that this version of Ron was younger than she was. Only by about six months, but it was still frightening.

"Ron?" Harry's familiar voice called. She knew that Harry wouldn't come through the curtains and catch Ron like this. There was no way Harry wouldn't have forced Ron to the hospital wing otherwise. No way that the dark magical infection would have gotten so bad. Beside her Ron didn't answer. Instead he reached over and, with uniform and all, turned on the water. Ron, head still on his knees, turned it towards the curtains with tense shoulders. There were tears shining in Ron's eyes mixing with the water.

"Come on Harry..." Ginny choked out desperately.

"I'll meet you in the Great Hall for dinner okay mate?" Harry called.

Ron didn't answer. He didn't say anything when Harry showered and left nor when any of the other boys of the team came through. Ginny sat there, not feeling the water, but watching Ron's lips turn slightly blue from what obviously was the cold shower.

Finally... finally Ron dragged his top of the uniform off to reveal the ugly scars covering his arms and torso. They were angry and red, spots black, as they intertwined around him. Ron stiffly massaged them in the water. Then he did something that almost made her cry. He slowly rolled his shoulders in a mechanical and familiar way. It was the way he'd been doing it for nearly two years. A habit Ginny had noted, but hadn't questioned. He'd do it during a match, at the dinner table, while he walked to class, along Diagon Alley. She'd seen it in the other memories too, he'd done it during one of their arguments.

Ron seemed in control of his emotions again. The pain didn't seem as if it was terribly, but still obviously present. It was as she stepped out of the shower that she felt the familiar tug and realized with a start that she must have stayed on the field letting out her anger for a

long time to be allowed to see this. Her younger self was obviously walking or storming away from the field now. She was leaving. Ginny turned back to the silent shower behind her, not invading his privacy by peeking in, but worried about how Ron managed to get back to the Castle.

The rest of the afternoon Ginny spent fervently searching her memories for more evidence of what she'd missed. She found that the more foul Ron had been in sixth the more likely chance of following him into an attack. Still with all her searching she only found two more like the one before. After looking and looking she found that for the most part Ron would simply hurt a little, messaging his scars absentmindedly. Now that she knew what to look for she saw the signs everywhere. Ron wasn't horribly ill yet, just in mild pain, with much worse attack spread out very infrequently. He rolled his shoulders during homework, snapped a little more, was more short tempered, took longer showers. How could she blame Harry and Hermione for missing things like that? Those weren't signs those were Ron being pouty and unreasonable, even she thought that, fuck her whole family thought that at the time. Overdramatic Ron being unbearable to deal with.

It was the third attack, after hours of searching and searching, that she found herself in now. It was just after Dumbledore's funeral and she'd snuck up to the boy's dorm room to see Harry one last time as he packed. The first time around she remembered seeing Ron roll his eyes as her younger self glared at him. Taking the hint her brother had got out of bed slowly, as if mocking her, before rolling his shoulders as he left the room.

This time, as she followed him out of the room, she saw him sigh in relief to be out of there. Ron leaned his head gently against the door, forehead touching wood, as he seemed to collect himself. When Ron entered the prefect's bathroom, she hesitated, she didn't want to be privy to another wanking session. The first had been mortifying. She'd never felt her face heat up so fast or felt her body move so quickly to leave. She entered cautiously. Ron had simply laid down

on one of the benches in the bathroom. He had a hand to his forehead again and he was breathing in and out carefully.

Ginny moved into the room and sat down beside the bench. The mind healer simply leaned against the wall wearily. The woman had suggested several times that 'perhaps' they should postpone more searching for another day. It was only Ginny's persistent, desperate insistence that they continued. By now both recognized the situation. Ron had taken to escaping from everyone to simply find places to lay down for a few moments. The last one had been before the last quidditch game and much to her guilt younger Ginny had come in, caught him laying down, and swatted Ron for it.

When Ron gasped and curled in on himself on the bench Ginny whirled around. The Mind healer too had made her way to sit in front of Ron. Ginny couldn't help it. She reached for his hand. She felt a hollowness enter her that felt familiar by now as the fingers slipped through. Ron turned on his side bringing his arms to his chest as his body trembled. He whimpered and no one heard. The sounds echoed off the empty prefect's bathroom and no one walked in. No one was there. No one had been there for him.

"You stupid, stupid idiot," Ginny mumbled.

Ginny wanted to brush the hair out of Ron's face and put a cold rag against his hurting head, but this wasn't technically her Ron yet. She couldn't do that. She wasn't even sure if she could do it for her Ron.

"Have you seen enough?" The mind healer asked her gently.

Ginny shook her head. She couldn't leave him like this. If she did then who would know what happened to him? No one because Ron was making sure that as much of his sickness would go with him to the grave. He hadn't answered any of Harry's questions about what had happened in sixth year.

Tears leaked out of Ron's too bright blue eyes as he brought his knees closer to his chest. Ron blinked rapidly to force them away.

They fell down the side of his face sideways, one tear traveling over the bridge of his nose. Ginny wasn't sure how long she was there before blood started dripping out of his mouth. She freaked a little as Ron struggled to stand, cursing violently as he went over to the sinks, rinsing his mouth out to spit water and blood across the sink. Ron stuck out his tongue showing off the bite marks. She felt herself nearly collapsing with relief. He'd simply bit it. Ron wavered where he stood. His grip tightened onto the sinks edge until the knuckles turned white. His head leaning forward to touch the cool reflective surface of the mirror with his forehead.

"Leave me alone," Ron demanded.

Ginny took a step back, looking to the Mind Healer for answers.

"He's not talking to us," the Mind Healer said quietly.

"There's no one else here," Ginny shot back.

Ginny walked up behind Ron.

"Ronnie?" Ginny asked quietly. Ron was staring straight ahead at his own reflection.

Ron stepped back, still focused entirely on the mirror.

"Get the fuck out. Leave me alone," Ron demanded, never so much as turning to look at her.

"Ron! I didn't mean to invade your privacy... I just... I needed to know okay?"

Ron was breathing hard and fast as he glared at his reflection. Ginny finally had enough. She walked around to face Ron, but saw that he honestly wasn't seeing her at all. She turned towards the mirror and screamed in fright.

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**A/N: The next chapter will be posted in a few days. Please Review to tell me what you think! Critical Reviews will lead to faster update of next chapter as I'm not sure quite how to end the next chapter.**

## Define Hope Ch14

Disclaimer: Somehow... I still don't own Harry Potter. Who'd have thought?

A/N: I hate life. So my new laptop doesn't have a place to play a cd. It's meant for travel. So I buy word 2013 online to download it directly onto my laptop to do my work. I take this thing everywhere and type everything. Well a few weeks ago it informed me that I bought a counterfeit and locked my computer's word program so I couldn't see any of my work unless I bought a legit word program. Unfortunately I was broke and just got my paycheck today... My chapter was FINISHED and I couldn't get to it AND I lost money on a fake program. It was most definitely a Fuck my life moment. So my deepest apologies guys for this being so late.

Also... There were a few reviews commenting on the believableness of following someone passed their own memory. We'll... technically speaking there was never much information given about the ability concerning the pensive or memories. I was actually inspired by another fanfiction called 'Within these Walls' by Solstice Muse where Fred sees Ron's memory of the hanging torture despite the fact that the Death Eater, whose memory he's following, is not in the room with him. It was an interesting concept, that as long as the owner of the memory is close, they can see others memories. And yes I do believe it's a breach in privacy, but the entirety of the Harry Potter Cast seems very much not to care about others privacy and more about their own curiosity so I think it fits cannon characteristic very well. Thanks to everyone for reviewing by the way! You guys are awesome!

### Chapter 14: Define Hope

"Listen, don't believe in fairy tales!

After that happy-ever-after wedding, they never tell you the rest of the story."

-The Poisonwood Bible by Kingslover

*Ron usually handled Harry's nightmares. It was a pattern that the five dorm mates had become accustomed to in the years they lived together in Hogwarts. Sometimes Ron would sleep too deeply and Harry's tossing, turning and murmuring would briefly wake one of the others. For the most part though Ron managed to catch them and had the tendency to, depending on how bad it was, simply shake him awake or go down to the common room with him.*

*There were a few nights when Neville himself had a nightmare about his parents and been woken up to find bright blue eyes frowning down at him in sleepy concern. Neville would simply give Ron a shaky grin to his silent invitation to talk before rolling over and going back to sleep. Students at Hogwarts often whispered how lucky Ron was to have Harry as a best friend. Neville agreed. He'd often seen the two and been envious of how strong their friendship was. Harry would go through hell and back for Ron and vice versa. It struck him as odd that no one ever wondered how lucky Harry was to have Ron though.*

*Neville didn't have a best friend. He had friends, but no one that stood out as his best friend. There was Dean and Seamus, his dorm mates. Then there was Ginny, Collin, and Luna who'd become close friends in their third year and whom he'd befriended in their fifth year. Lavender and Parvati had been friends as long as Harry, Hermione and Ron had. Fred, George and Lee practically bathed with each other. They could all be called his friends, but they were paired off. They were best friends. Neville was close to several of them. He and Harry even had a special kind of bond that was closer than just friends, but not quite best friends. So he was in the unique position of seeing things from the outside while being involved on many of the inside stuff even if he wasn't involved in all of the inside stuff.*

*He knew how it felt to be alone, but he wasn't entirely what one would describe as lonely. No one ever turned him away when he sat with them, but no one ever invited him into their group either. So it genuinely confused him when people whispered things like how difficult it must be for Harry to have a best friend like Ron who was short tempered and foul. Harry didn't know about those rumors though, Ron had asked their friends not to say anything about them. Hermione had caught snippets here and there, but most avoided gossiping near the strict rule follower Granger so she remained mostly uninformed. Neville knew that the rumors came from older Gryffindors their first few years of school, but they hadn't dissipated after the older generations graduated.*

*Neville, Seamus and Dean avoided mentioning it, but there was a very distinct dislike between Ron and most other students outside their particular class. Ron didn't talk to them and they didn't talk to Ron. Seamus had told him once that he'd overheard an older Gryffindor making nasty comments straight to Ron's face. It unsettled him, the thought that fellow housemates, not just Slytherins, were giving one of his friends a hard time. Later Luna informed him that members from her house did the same thing to Ron when no one was around. She also said that Ron would just glare at them in hatred while leaving. That, the way Ron blew off people who gave him a hard time, was the origins of Luna's crush.*

*He didn't understand how Harry and Hermione never noticed the fact that if it was a Hogwarts student they were unfamiliar with Ron's hackles would raise near instantly. Neville, Dean and Seamus had become weary of introducing Ron to any friends they made outside of their group. It was unnatural for someone so social and friendly as Ron to stare at one of their friends as if he wasn't sure they were going to bite him or not.*

*Never in a million years would he say this to Harry, but he honestly didn't think he'd ever be able to handle being his best friend; the late nights helping Harry deal with nightmares, the nasty comments students said to Ron when he was alone, the injuries that came with*

*sticking by Harry's side, the high expectations people seemed to hold Ron towards, the looks Ron got when he didn't meet their requirements. Neville was never surprised when Ron would come into the common room in a foul mood. He was more surprised that Harry and Hermione were surprised.*

*During fourth year it had practically torn Ron apart to be angry with Harry. The redhead had wandered aimlessly around for days before settling close by himself, Dean and Seamus uncertainly. The remarks then had been particularly vicious. Even one of their teachers, the man they'd thought was Moody at the time and whom Ron heavily looked up to, had made a comment. He wondered if Harry knew how many people were angry at Ron whenever Ron got into an argument with Harry simply on Harry's behalf. Neville was certain he'd be terrified to ever say anything mean to Harry if he was Harry's best friend. Even when he didn't agree with Ron he still admired him for his guts to disagree with Harry.*

*So Ron usually handled Harry's nightmares. It was a pattern that the five dorm mates had become accustomed to in the years they lived together in Hogwarts. Harry was a very deep sleeper and didn't wake up unless Ron or a nightmare woke him up. So on those occasions when Ron himself had a nightmare Harry would sleep right through it. Sometimes Ron's tossing, turning and murmuring would briefly wake one of them up before they fell asleep again. On the one occasion Ron cried out loudly enough to fully wake Neville he felt a well of guilt eat away at him. While it wasn't intentionally done, Ron didn't have his best friend to wake him up when he had a nightmare like Harry did, because Harry wasn't woken so easily.*

*Neville moved out of bed and shook Ron awake. When Ron shot up out of his bed looking like Fluffy was on his tail Neville hoped the look on his face told Ron that he could talk to him if he wanted to. Neville didn't think he pulled it off though, because Ron simply gave him a nod of thanks before getting up from bed and leaving the room, not to return until dawn had long passed. Ron never mentioned it and so neither did Neville.*

*Later Neville would regret not following Ron down the stairs to the common room. It struck him that it was something Ron would have done for Harry. It genuinely confused him when people whispered things like how difficult it must be for Harry to have a best friend like Ron but he often wondered how difficult it must be to have a best friend like Harry. All the unspoken consequences and expectations that came with the position. He'd never mention that in a million years though, because as much as he didn't think he'd be able to handle being either of their best friends, he would have given anything to at least be able to try.*

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Arthur Weasley fiddled with his muggle contraption known to many muggle borns as a cd player. He'd been collecting CD's secretly for the last few years or so. His hands shook as he used the tool to screw the little metal piece in place. It had taken asking a few friends around town, muggle borns, in order to figure out how it worked. Ingenious it was. Placing a small disk, they claimed held music within it somehow, into the metal mouth and closing it was just the first step. Then you just had to put the little power sticks in the right way and BAM! Music would come out of the soft little pieces you put in your ears.

It was the morning of Christmas Eve and he wanted to make sure that everyone got exactly what they needed. He didn't want to fumble it up like he normally did every year. His family needed him to get this right, to cheer them up. He'd avoided giving them muggle things this year, for the most part, but this was special. He could finish this... he knew how, but his hands wouldn't stop shaking. Arthur sighed, fingers messaging his temple.

Molly had called him down to breakfast, but he was having a hard time wanting to go down there. That bothered him. He shouldn't feel bothered to sit and eat with the rest of his family. He shouldn't feel tense about whether or not his son would be down there or not. He cringed at his own thoughts. There it was. The elephant he didn't want to face.

The screw missed again, stabbing his hand hard enough to bring his thoughts to a halt for a moment. He flexed it experimentally, trying to keep his mind carefully blank. It hadn't broken the skin. Not at all. It was a reminder to keep him more alert though. Arthur examined the CD player for the millionth time that week. Despite the fact he didn't know nearly as much as an individual raised by muggles he still had quite the grasp on many of the inventions. He'd been tinkering with them for years now after all.

"Arthur!" Molly called.

He put the CD player down. They'd all returned to the Burrow after checking it out for any dangers. Ron had been very sheepish and withdrawn about the whole thing. Not that he hadn't been withdrawn before, but the last few days he'd taken to staying up in his and Harry's room. Percy and himself had been home since the incident, having both already gotten the days off. Why did he constantly feel like he was at odds with at least one of his boys? First Charlie and his decision to study dragons for a living, there was a heart attack, then of course Percy going off and allying himself with the Ministry goons bent on ignoring the upcoming war with Voldemort. All that time wondering if Percy would walk into some kind of trap that would be the end of him. Charlie had done magnificently though, only baring a few nicks on him here and there. Percy too had shown up to the final battle all apologies and no harm done.

Arthur had honestly seen it coming with Ron. He'd known that there would be something he'd get into an argument with the boy over. Ron was too much of a spitfire, too much of an 'I'm going to quite literally throw myself into the most dangerous situation you can think of dad' type. Ron wanted to be an Auror. After the war Arthur had quietly resigned himself to that fact. That his son would be going out there to hunt down Death Eaters, Snatchers and the like, after spending a year having them *hunt* Ron down. He'd yelled at Ron for stealing his car, for going to the Department of Mysteries, for leaving school before he got his NEWTS. He was very tired of yelling at his son now and had simply decided that no matter what you do children

will, seemingly always, take the path your least happy with. At least Ron had done it in a way that he could really be proud of. That was something.

Now Arthur simply didn't know what to do. He hadn't thought he'd be in disagreement with Ron over something like this. What to do, what to do, what to do... Why was it that for all the different manuals in the world one didn't say 'To Parents everywhere: How to handle the unexpected.' He'd buy that book. He'd already bought one book in fact... a little different but still useful: 'PTSD and how to live with it.' He'd been using it's guidelines in regards to George, Harry, and Hermione. A coworker had suggested it to him after he'd explained in a frazzled state his situation at home a few months back.

"Arthur!" Molly snapped.

Arthur gathered himself before heading downstairs. He was down there this time. Arthur felt both relief and anxiety at the sight of his son's emaciated form. It was almost normal looking: Ron sitting down between Harry and Hermione as they talked to one another. In fact he could barely tell how small Ron had gotten because of the many coats Ron wore over his shirt. The only real sign was the sunken cheeks and bruises. Arthur took a seat down the table from him, turning to Percy, who seemed immersed in a conversation with Fleur about her reaction's to the reappearance of a high level French Ambassador that had gone missing during the war.

Arthur only half paid attention. His eyes subtle watching Ron. Ron must have felt him though, because he found himself looking into bright blue, cold eyes. They'd been cold for a long while now. Longer than simply this past summer. He'd come to feel comforted by them. They were so sharp they could cut, but always so focused on using that piercing look to tear into any who threatened his loved ones. They held such strength and resilience, damaged as they may be, they just kept on going. Percy was his only other child that received his blue eyes, but his and Percy's were a darker shade than Ron's.



Arthur, unsure how to react at being caught staring, simply tried nodding encouragingly towards his youngest boy. Ron's lips twitched, before breaking into a small smile. Arthur broke into his own.

"Ronnie, you think you can eat a bit more than that?" Molly demanded softly.

Arthur felt his own smile falter at the same time he saw it wiped off of Ron's face. Every meal Ron attended eventually went this way.

"Mum..." Ron sighed tiredly. "I ate half a plate. I eat anymore it will make me sick."

"You barely had anything on your plate to begin with!" Molly announced, nearly hysterical. "Yesterday you said it was the medicine."

"Mrs. Weasley..." Harry began hesitantly, looking at the barely eaten plate, before stopping.

They all wanted Ron to eat more. This sickness that Ron was suffering under... the silent thing that no one wanted to talk about in every room was still so new that no one knew how to handle it. Should they force him to eat or let it go? Should they allow him to change his bandages like he sometimes insisted or do it themselves? Should they make sure someone was in the room with him or was it alright to just let it be? Should they make him go to bed when he fell asleep on the couch or was it alright to allow him to sleep there? The worst thing was that Ron wasn't willing to open up about any of it. He just kept insisting that he was fine and that he didn't need their help. As a result they had to keep guessing in the dark at what Ron was just trying to cover up and what they could really allow. Ron had known and been handling the sickness on his own for over six months and they were all playing catch up these past six days.

Abruptly Ron stood from the table. His sharp blue eyes turned on them now. Arthur sighed heavily.

"Son..." Arthur pleaded. "Just a few more bites."

Ron seemed to deflate as his eyes wandered around the table. Harry and Hermione, avoiding looking at him. He could see Bill, Fleur, Percy, and Charlie fiercely nodding. Molly's eyes urging their son to sit back down. Ginny simply scowled at the corner of the room, refusing to look at anyone in the room. Arthur felt guilty as Ron sagged into the chair again. All eyes fell on him as Ron cut the pancakes with his fork, he paused and looked up, there was no small smile this time.

"Stop staring," Ron hissed at everyone.

Nine pairs of eyes looked away.

Arthur almost laughed as all nine of them glanced back at Ron just to find themselves caught under Ron's glare. The rest of breakfast was spent in relative silence, until George came bursting in. George leaned over Ron to grab two sausages, biting into them both, before awkwardly pausing at the sound Ron made.

"Alright there Ronnie," George asked with his mouth full. Arthur grimaced as the queasy look on Ron's face turned green. Covering his mouth Ron tried backing up from the table, but George was in the way. Arthur could see Ron fighting with himself even as George hurriedly backed away, but it was too late. Puke surged forward onto his lap and the front of the table.

"Sorry!" George cried out, mouth still full.

Ron puked again.

Hermione was already waving her wand to clear the table near them while Harry performed a cleaning spell on all of them. Ron rushed out of the room, ears burning with embarrassment, even while his

face still looked green. Arthur stilled Molly as she stood to go after him.

"I've got this one dear," Arthur murmured, Molly looked about ready to argue, but he gestured to the rest of the family. They needed help too right now. Molly stilled and nodded.

Arthur got up, seeing Harry and Hermione worriedly glancing in Ron's direction, but still needing to finish the spells. He nodded to them, showing that he would take care of it this time. They seemed weary of that idea, eyes catching each others, as they had a silent conversation between them. That... stung a little.

"M' sorry!" George said, eyes wide. "I didn't think... it was just..."

"I know son, I know."

Arthur flinched in sympathy as he neared the bathroom to hear the sounds of retching. Entering the bathroom he let his old bones settle down beside Ron and rubbed his son's back in what he hoped was a comforting motion.

*' There goes all the food he just ate.'*

Nothing else was coming up anymore, but Ron's body was still dry heaving.

"eh was th' smell," Ron spat. "Couldn't take it."

"I see," Arthur said, though he didn't at all. The smell of what? There'd been more than a few dishes. "Perhaps you should try to explain what makes you sick hm? What you can handle?"

Ron let out a groan of exasperation with his face still firmly over the toilet.

"I've told her dad!" Ron rasped in annoyance. "I told her I can't handle thick food, I can't handle strong flavors, but you know her! She can't serve bland food. She can't help adding stuff! Then she

just... she fucking expects me to eat too much of something I can't eat to begin with!"

Arthur cringed.

*' Oh, Molly.'*

"She never listens. I tell her I don't like corned beef and she hands me corned beef. I hate maroon but every year I get maroon. It's been the same since I was a kid. She just... she's got good intentions. I know she does... I just... this time I can't just sweep it under the rug and call it a day."

Arthur sighed heavily.

"I'll talk to her," Arthur promised.

Ron shuddered and grinned at the same time.

"So it won't stop then," Ron said knowingly. "I'll get Harry to cook me up some stuff while I'm here."

"I'll convince her," Arthur said more forcefully.

"You've never won this argument with her dad, not when it comes to me anyway, I'll find another way. Thanks though, didn't mean to blubber to ya over the bog," Ron said shakily standing up.

"This is important Ron," Arthur said, getting angry.

Those icy sharp blue eyes focused on him at those words making Arthur wonder what he'd said wrong.

"I suppose it wasn't so important to you until now huh?" Ron asked quietly.

"That's not..." Arthur began.

"I'm going upstairs for a kip," Ron interrupted.

---

Making it up to the room Ron was thoroughly bewildered to find his sister pacing across his room like a caged beast. He supposed that this was going to happen at some point. Weary Ron ever so carefully crossed the room to sit on his bed.

"I need to talk to you," Ginny snapped, finally turning to face him.

"You don't say," Ron rasped. "I thought you'd come up to my room for a cuppa."

"This is serious!" Ginny hissed.

"Deadly serious?" Ron joked.

Ginny seemed to pale and redden at the same time. She raised her hand, as if to hit him beside the head, causing Ron to flinch.

"Sorry! Bad joke! Bad timing!" Ron rasped, bringing his arms up defensively.

Ginny seemed to catch herself, alternating between glaring at Ron, and inwardly arguing with herself. Consequently she resumed pacing. While watching her in growing irritation he pulled out lightly flavored gum to wash away the foul taste of vomit. Constantly brushing his teeth in the hospital had caused his gums to bleed so the nurses had suggested this. Not so strong, but enough to get rid of lingering tastes. Ginny opened and closed her mouth several times as she tried to get her thoughts together.

"Gin... your killing me here," Ron announced after several minutes of this.

Ginny spun on her heels, eyes blazing in fury.

"This isn't funny!"

"Wha...? Oh... yeah... I didn't mean it that time," Ron told her sheepishly.

Something clunked loudly against the floor. Ron looked down before hurriedly snatching up the objects that slipped out of his pocket when he'd leaned back. Ginny's eyes softened as Ron examined them for damage.

"That's your deluminator right? The one damaged in the final battle? You transfigured Fred's wand piece to fix the top part that was broken off and bent," Ginny said softly, her fingers wrapping around her own necklace with her piece attached. She sat down on the bed next to him. Ron nodded as he straightened out the photo that fell with it. It was a picture of her brother, Hermione and Harry at Fleur and Bill's wedding. Harry stood in the middle, arms wrapped around Ron and Hermione, absolutely brimming with happiness and contentment. Hermione was fiddling around with the hem of her red dress, smiling nervously at the camera, before shooting Harry and Ron a glance of pure love and understanding. Ron towered over the other two, one hand secretly hovering a foot above Harry's to demonstrate his shortness, a knowing, cocky smirk on his lips that was twitching with the need to become a full blown grin. The picture was beyond wrinkled.

"Do you always keep them on you like that?" Ginny asked.

"Every single day," Ron answered.

"Ron?"

"Hm?"

"Do you.... That is... what do you see when you look in the mirror?" Ginny demanded.

"A pile of bones with more scars than skin," Ron answered bitterly. "If all you've got is a witty repertory of annoying questions you can leave."

"No! That's not what I meant... I mean... is there anything else you see? Something else?" Ginny questioned.

Ron felt something click in his brain in a very bad way. He stared at Ginny in dawning horror. There was no way in fucking hell she knew. No way. He'd never told anyone.

"Ginny... what are you talking about?" Ron whispered.

"Do you see..." Ginny bit her lip hard until a bead of blood appeared. "Do you see any creatures... in the mirror with you?"

Ron felt his insides shrivel up like he'd been hexed. He forced his face to go blank. He breathed in deeply and tried composing himself as best he could.

He faked a laugh of disbelief, looking incredulously at her.

"Are you mad? Creatures in the mirror? Like 'Waldo the Shadow Eater?' My mirrors are bedtime character's free thanks," Ron rasped, shaking his head, as if in amusement.

Ginny peered at him through her curtain of long hair, hurt glinting in her hazelnut brown eyes.

"You've gotten quite good at lying Ron," Ginny said, voice strained as she walked hurriedly out of the room.

Ron tiredly laid back onto his bed, curling in on himself and closing his eyes.

"It will take more than that Gin," Ron said softly to no one.

---

Lunch time of Christmas Eve came much too quickly for Ron's taste. His growling stomach already dreading what his mother had cooked up. Heading downstairs he hoped he could grab a piece of soft bread or cold white rice Percy had brought home the night before.

He was in the middle of this endeavor when Harry walked into the room, dressed smartly in a suit, grabbing an apple from the fruit bowl on the counter. He stopped mid bite in surprise at the rolls stuffed with meat before pulling one over to himself.

"What are these? Taste good," Harry asked around his mouthful.

Molly beamed.

"Rolls with pork in them dear. The sauce is a gravy Muriel gave me."

"What are you wearing?" Ron asked, gesturing to Harry's getup. Harry scowled over at Ron, swallowing his mouthful, but refusing to speak.

"Trials concerning Lestrangle's husband today," Bill answered. "Mum's going too, since she's the one who... well you know."

"Rodolphus Lestrangle wasn't much involved in the second war though, only in the first," Ron said.

"He had life imprisonment the first time around, but the thing is that the new jail isn't all one big miserable horror fest. It's layered. The first level for the least dangerous criminals while the last is for the most dangerous criminals," Harry explained. "After all we don't want an incident similar to Hagrid's predicament to be tortured by something like a dementor."

"Smart," Ron mumbled, "but why are you involved with this when you never even saw Rodolphus Lestrangle."

"Since it's such a notorious Death Eater Kingsley wants Harry to be there as a reassurance that everything's going to be okay," Hermione answered, stepping into the kitchen. She looked around the table before hesitantly sitting beside Ron. He winced, torn between wanting to pull her towards him, and getting up and sitting somewhere else. It really didn't matter that she was beside him now when he was sick. It didn't change any of his reasoning. He still



needed to distance himself. It would just be harder. Even if it meant... even if it meant her kissing another guy in front of him or anything like that. She needed to move on.

Jealousy roared its ugly head at the thought demanding the what if question:

*' What if you survive idiot? What then? Do you honestly think she'd want you after this? Asking her to let you go?'*

It had been a question nagging at the back of his mind. One he didn't want to think about, but that forced its way tooth and nail to the forefront every once and a while. Harry fidgeted, drawing Ron's attention back towards him.

"Do you get pulled in for things like that a lot?" Ron asked quietly. Harry just shrugged helplessly as he shoved another dumpling into his mouth.

"Hermione gets pulled in just as often as Harry," Charlie added, generously adding sauce over his food.

Ron felt his chest tighten as both Harry and Hermione looked away from him. He turned accusing eyes on them.

"He runs you ragged... I get that, with everything that's happened, but you let him bully you into useless propaganda to reassure a bunch of half-wit's that a mentally foregone Death Eater won't hurt them anymore?" Ron demanded.

"That is not fair Ron," Hermione hissed.

"People are hurting," Harry replied wearily.

"Was that what Kingsley told you to egg you in the right direction?" Ron asked incredulously. "Oh course they're hurting! They're going to be hurting for a long time. Countless people died! You can't go running yourself into the ground over every bleedin' heart! How

many times have I told you that if you try to fix every single little thing in the world you'll end up fixing nothing! All you're doing is killing yourself! And then where will the world be?"

"Oh that's rich coming from you!" Hermione snapped, livid. "What were you trying to accomplish huh? I'm so stubborn I'm just going to move to the other side of the world to hide the fact I'm sick!"

"The only people I'm trying to take care of is you two! I don't think I can cure the world! I don't run myself ragged trying to do everything at once! All I wanted was to try not to be too far behind you two with the Strategy training. I didn't want you to see this because you try to fix everything! Just like all of this! I bet you two go to every tiny little useless thing Kingsley asks of you right? Can't say no Hermione and gotta be responsible if it kills me Harry!" Ron pronounced.

"Ronald!" Molly snapped, upset.

"Well isn't that just..." Hermione's eyes went blank for a second as she registered his words. "You did Auror training while you were like this!?"

"You know I did," Ron stated, taken aback by the sudden change in topic. "Not the physical portion though." Harry too was looking at him oddly now and Ron felt a foreboding notion that he'd just lost his argument to something else.

"That's right," Harry murmured in realization. "You were working too. You were... you went to classes and then work and then volun... then the hospital. You were never home."

Hermione rounded on him.

"How can you even think that we've been running ourselves into our deathbeds! You've been doing much worse than we have for a lot longer." There were tears that pricked at the corner of her eyes at the last part, but no one in the room mentioned them as she gently

wiped them away with her forefinger and thumb. "You've no right to question how we've been taking care of ourselves Ron."

"I wasn't weighing myself down with useless stuff though," Ron tried defensively. "There was nothing I did that wasn't absolutely necessary."

"Those classes were not necessary!" Hermione hissed.

"There done aren't they? I was forced to quit," Ron rasped, throwing his hands in the air with exasperation. "No matter how hard I tried I couldn't do it so it's done so drop it!"

"So you *can't* run yourself into the ground so it's not right for us to do it?" Hermione pushed.

"You admit that you're running yourself into the ground then!" Ron exclaimed triumphantly.

"Enough... you both have a point. Just leave it be for now," Harry announced sharing a look with Hermione.

Ron felt taken aback. Harry and Hermione didn't share looks like *that*. He and Hermione shared looks like *that*. Worry and concern were things that had overwhelmed them several times throughout the years for Harry. When Harry and Hermione shared looks they were of exasperation or irritation towards him. Not this. Careful simply wasn't a word or concept used around him.

It was like Hermione said one particularly vicious argument before: He was a shallow, temperamental prick incapable of deep thought and therefore did not require the same trepidation when considering his mental condition. That little throw around of words had, much to his shame, confused him at first. The evening after the argument, when he finally understood what she meant, had been when he'd been consumed with hurt. She'd apologized the next day stating that she didn't mean anything she said, as he'd done likewise, but this time it felt hollow. Afterwards they'd made their way to the room of

requirements for practice and their duel had been a little more intense and the slightest bit more bitter. He remembered how it started, over something stupid, like usual.

*' How come you always ask Harry how his days been, but not me?'*

*' I could ask you the same, you've never asked me," she replied.*

*' Because you always launch right into it every time you see us. How can I ask if you always preempt me?'*

*' Are you saying you would?'*

*' Just like I do for Harry, yeah.'*

*' No other reason?'*

*' Should there be?'*

That had apparently been the wrong thing to say. To this day he didn't see anything wrong in saying that she was one of the people closest to him. Did she want him to confess his undying love? What had she wanted? Did she think he went around asking all of his siblings or his parents how their day went? Certainly not. If they had something interesting to say they said it. If you weren't the loudest or fastest then you weren't heard. He never had to be loud or fast with Harry and Hermione though.

Ron peered at the two of them, being careful with their words, around him of all people.

"I'm not gonna break if we argue you know?" Ron murmured to the two. "We can talk like we've always talked."

Harry wouldn't look him in the eyes. No one else, not even his mother, was willing to say anything to that. Hermione pulled her hair back into a pony tail before letting out a large breath of air. They both got up to leave.

"Wait!" Ron snapped, standing up hurriedly. "I'm coming with. Just give me... just give me a minute to get dressed."

"I think not!" Molly cried out.

"So you're gonna lock me up then, mum?" Ron demanded.

"You can barely stand Ron!" Bill admonished.

"I was out with my friends before you lot came about," Ron shot back.

Out of the corner of his eye he could see that Hermione had gone pale. Harry too seemed upset, but there was a lingering hope. His best friend wanted him to come. That was good enough for him.

"I'll be right back," Ron told them.

"You most certainly won't!" Molly hollered. "I won't allow it!"

Ron turned towards the stairs, cringing at how horribly long it was to get to his room, before trying to hurry up them. It didn't really work too well. If he wasn't utterly embarrassed he'd have guffawed over the fact he looked like a crooked, hobbling old man going up steps. Suddenly though, he felt an arm around his waist and one of his arms pulled to rest on someone's shoulders.

"Charlie?" Ron questioned.

"Suppose I oughtn't let you wear yourself out before you even get going huh?" Charlie asked. His eyes were twinkling in a way he hadn't seen in a while. There was still anger, but it had dampened. "When you're gone, doing your thing, I'll switch your room with Ginny's old one. That way you only have to go up one short flight."

"K," Ron said weakly. He didn't win arguments. It felt off. He just kept arguing and arguing until he and the other person stormed away in anger. He wasn't sure how to react and all the fight sort of just slipped away from him. As they trudged up the stairs he could hear

Bill trying to cool their mum off from her angry speal. "Could you..." Ron faltered. "... could you renew the heating charm on my jacket... when we get up?"

"Course," Charlie told him, a grin touching his lips. Ron sent Charlie an indignant sharp kick when the older brother lifted him over three steps unexpectedly.

"Don't," Ron croaked.

"Used to do that to Perce all the time when we were kids. Always so proper, but when I'd lift him up... should have seen the look on his face," Charlie said with a deep chuckle. "Kid was absolutely delighted."

Charlie did it again. Ron let out a breath that resembled a chuckle this time.

"Yeah?" Ron asked, as they made it passed another flight.

"Yeah. His geeky horn rimmed glasses would be half way off his face and he'd be grinning like a madman."

"Wish I could have seen that," Ron rasped.

His feet left the ground for a third time before he was brought into the room. Ron rummaged through his bag, pulling out clothes decent enough to be out in public with. Most of his clothes, clothes he'd picked up in the last six months at least, consisted of sweat pants and t-shirts. He felt himself shake a little as he got to the last of his clothes only to realize that the only dress pants he owned that fit were the ones Antea picked up for him for Rose's funeral. Throwing them to the side he picked up a white t-shirt, it would be hidden under his jacket anyways. Good enough. Ron reluctantly let the blanket he'd carried all this way drop before undressing once more to get the new, nicer looking clothes on. He paused before taking off the last layer though when he caught Charlie looking.

"Could you..." Ron said, gesturing towards the door.

Charlie frowned.

"You need the bandages changed don't you?" Charlie asked. "At least twice a day. That's what Bill said."

"I'll get them later," Ron said, uncomfortably. It was one thing for a nurse to see. He wasn't even happy that Bill and George had seen. Bill had been nice enough to clean his wounds yesterday, but he was better today. Stronger. He could manage it.

"Don't be stupid. You can't put the salve on your back," Charlie said, grabbing Ron's bag and sitting behind him.

"Harry and Hermione are waiting. I told them I'd be there in a minutes," Ron said, squirming away from his brother.

"And it will only be a minute. I'm very good at wrapping wounds," Charlie murmured.

Ron snorted.

"I'm sure you are... all self-inflicted from thinking you could get away with jumping on dragons backs and what not," Ron grouched.

"Karma would have my baby brother being able to do that without a scratch while I get six pretty new scars," Charlie chuckled, beginning to unwrap the bandages. "Seriously though... my old boss told me he should have hired you instead after he saw the newspapers I sent him. You've crushed my pride when it's all I had."

Pig flew through the window to land on top of Ron's head. The Minute Owl hooted excitedly, digging little claws into Ron's scalp, as he made himself comfortable.

"Bloody nuisance," Ron grumbled as he pulled the bird from his head, stroking his feathers lovingly, "hasn't stopped nipping and

crooning since I got here. You'd think Hermione attention starved him. Probably ignored him for the cat."

Ron ignored the still fingers against his shoulder blades and shortened breath.

"Not to worry... I'll feed you those little mice you like so much. The ones with the super big heads and little bodies," Ron told the fluttering Pig.

"Hoot?" Pig crooned, head tilting at a disturbing angle.

The breath normalized and with it the fingers began to move again. He felt salve being pressed into the wound. He tried to turn his hiss of pain into a long drawn out sigh, but it didn't fool either of them. The Minute Owl hooted excitedly at the breath hitting his face though. The silly creature purposefully inching closer to Ron's mouth before scurrying away like he'd been caught when the breath hit him.

He felt Charlie's tense fingers finally leave his back.

"Almost done," Charlie announced in a subdued voice. Ron placed the salve on his chest and arm while he waited. Then Charlie wrapped them securely.

"Are you ready?"

"I will be once you make my jacket warm," Ron said with a wry smile.

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Ron felt slightly claustrophobic as he stood in the crowded streets. His hood had been pulled up and over his head, throwing his features into shadows, as people bumped into him. Kingsley had offered him a place on the stadium with Harry and Hermione. He deserved that placement, but Ron wasn't interested in anyone knowing he was around yet. He'd opted to stay in the audience to watch and see how things had changed. Idly he noticed it was the



same stage that he, Harry and Hermione had stood on to receive their Order of Merlin award just after Voldemort's defeat back in May.

Ron pushed red, dirty bangs out of his eyes, irritably noting that he'd have to take a shower when he got back, but the unexpected reentrance into England's underbelly of drama hadn't exactly been planned. Around him people murmured. Some quietly while others were near hysterics.

"Do you suppose there's many more out there? Hiding and just waiting for the chance to attack us?" A witch whispered nearby.

"The Ministry has it under control," her husband scolded her.

Someone snorted in a derisive manner.

"Yeah... like they did during the war you mean? Fantastic job that."

"They killed my wife those sons of o bitches. I'd like to get my hands on the blokes and show him what for!" a voice randomly shouted. There were thunderous cries of approval, causing Ron to laugh out loud at the lot. Awfully brave of them to be so outspoken and spirited after the fight was over and done with. The words seemed to have spread like wild fire though, as the whole crowd began to talk at once. LeStrange's husband had already been hauled off five minutes ago via port key, but the tense and frightened crowd of five minutes ago seemed to have forgotten that. They'd been getting more and more restless as time wore on and when Kingsley *finally* stepped on stage Ron felt a well of relief.

"Today we have placed an old terror back behind bars where he belongs," Kingsley began, pausing as he eyed the crowd calculatingly. The English witches and wizards screamed their approval. "But he is an old terror. He does not belong to this last war and has long since ceased to be a danger to the people. Our Aurors have been working day and night to get rid of the few scraps of Death Eater's Voldemort left behind. Every. Single. Day." Kingsley emphasized. Ron had to admit he was impressed at how well

Kingsley did in the spot light. He'd improved much from the newly made and nervous Minister of Magic he'd been not but six months ago. "The threat they pose is coming to an end, but the consequences of their actions is something that I believe we will struggle with for some time. Through our recovery we shall not make the fatal mistakes of our predecessors. The Ministry will be wiped clean of its transgressors and rebuilt by our saviors!"

From behind Ron was roughly pushed forward as the crowd surged in excitement. A violent string of curses left his mouth as Ron only just barely caught himself. Wearily he looked for a path that would distance himself from the people around him. He touched his hoodie to reassure himself it was still firmly covering his features adequately. It was.

"In fact today two of your saviors are here to speak to you!" Kingsley continued on. "Two who we all owe a great deal of gratitude towards. Hermione Granger..." the name caused a ripple effect through the crowd. He remembered how it looked from on stage for this to happen when one of their names were mentioned. It seemed almost as if the crowd lifted off the ground a bit. From here though he could tell it was because people stood straighter, some on tiptoes, to get a better view. People stopped slouching and whispering in each other's ears. "... the young woman responsible for many of the new recovery programs for those left homeless, injured, or affected by the war. She not only aided in the defeat of Voldemort, but has been working nonstop to take down his leftover Death Eaters as well!"

Warmth and pride spread through Ron as he heard the people's elation and respect. He'd listened to this all before, but on stage he'd been more embarrassed about his presence there than focused on what anyone was saying. Ron was halfway out of the crowd where he could already see empty streets behind the people, but he stopped to look at Hermione as she walked on stage and smiled brightly. She wore a stunning dress that hugged her in all the right places and had her hair held in matching ribbons through a complicated braid. The makeup covered up her dark circles well and

if you hadn't known her for years you'd never be able to detect the tense shoulders or anxiety that seemed to drip off her. To the crowd she clearly appeared well put together and nearly regal in stance.

She sat down and to Ron's eyes she seemed to sag into the chair. Her chestnut brown eyes searched the crowd, probably looking for him, before they strayed to the side stage where Harry would soon be presented.

"And I honestly don't think I need to tell you about this young man's deeds... as I believe the Daily Prophet has done well enough in detailing his every move," Kingsley announced. Ron both winced and inwardly congratulated the man on the withering tone he managed to display while smiling like that. Even if he was running his best friend and girl... other best friend ragged. "Harry Potter!" And there he was... short, pale and glasses. Ron's face split into a grin as he saw Harry give a half assed attempt at a smile. If the poor bastard hadn't insisted on staying up with Ron every night during his vomiting fest maybe he wouldn't look about ready to drop. He'd have to slip Harry a small dose of sleeping potions in his tea tonight to make sure he actually got some sleep. After all Ron wasn't the one running around having curses thrown at his head and doing speeches all day long.

Ron turned his neck from one side to the other. His head was starting to hurt. A sure sign that he needed another dose of pain reliever potion. He turned back in the direction he'd been heading out of the crowd, only half listening to Harry telling the crowd that 'no... a man whose brain doesn't even have enough sanity and wit enough to add two plus two was not going to sneak into their homes and kill their babies at night.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out his potion, his nose scrunching up in distaste at the blue liquid, before unscrewing the top.

The medicine never reached his lips though. Apparently Harry had said something remarkable because the crowd suddenly surged again and he got smacked rather hard across the face, the small

tube knocked out of his arms by a flailing limb. There was a very distinct sound of glass smashing. Ron scowled. Bloody typical.

"... and since tomorrow is Christmas I think I'll keep this short so that everyone can get home to their families eh?" Harry's voice drifted towards him in a fake cheerful voice. His scowl deepened as he looked back over his shoulder. Harry was upset. Something had happened and he'd missed it. There was another surge. This time he was completely knocked off his feet and hit the ground hard. The breath was taken out of him and he very nearly screamed as his chest landed directly on top of the broken glass. Gritting his teeth in pain and anger Ron got to his feet without bothering to look and see who'd done it. It didn't matter and it wasn't as if he was capable of doing anything about it. Ron shoved his way as best he could out of the crowd and onto the deserted streets behind it. Thoroughly put out and grumpy now Ron grumbled angrily as he checked himself over to make sure no shards had entered the bandages on his chest. His headache had, without a doubt, progressed to a body ache. Luckily his many layers of clothing had prevented the shards from piercing anything.

"Hey!" A voice called out from the crowd.

Ron looked around for a way to get to the backstage as quickly as possible. He needed to ask Hermione what had upset Harry and see how they were doing. They hated these things almost as much as he did; too many people, too much noise, and too much paranoia on their part.

"Hey mate! Guy in the blue hoodie!" A deep voice called out from behind him.

Instantly on alert Ron slid his wand, as useless as it was to him at this time, into his hand and turned partly towards the voice. Analyzing the situation. It was a short teenage boy with sandy blonde hair and a little plumpness to his frame. The young man smiled at him apologetically.

"I'm so sorry about that! I'm the one that knocked you down. Totally my fault! I'm such a spazz and well... it's Harry Potter! Ya, know?" the man said jovially.

Ron shifted from foot to foot, keeping his head down.

"Yeah, totally. Its fine," Ron rasped.

The man's features twisted in concern.

"Did I accidentally hurt you? You sound awful mate," the teen announced. He stepped forward and looked up, trying to see Ron's face. Ron stumbled back and turned away from him, touching the rim of the hoodie with his good hand.

"Fine... perfectly fine," Ron rasped, walking quickly away.

A hand gripped his bad wrist tightly. Ron hissed in pain, twisting out of the grip and turning on the teen before him with bared teeth. Dark spots touched his vision.

"You *are* hurt!" The boy said almost smugly, but with a hint of regret. "Let me see that. I can't do anything too amazing, but I can fix a sprained wrist."

' *Why are you being so persistent?!*'

"It's not sprained and I don't need your help," Ron rasped.

"Bit wound up tight aren't you?" the boy stated. "It's clearly..."

"Johnny what the bleedin' hell are you doing! You missed Potter man!" another voice called out.

Ron took advantage of the distraction and turned down a side alley to get away from the guy. Merlin he wished he could apparate... hell, he wished he could run! A strong gust of wind nipped at him even through three layers of clothing making the ache spike. It also had the unfortunate luck of flipping his hood off just as the persistent

young man pointed down the alley. Two friends had caught up to the sandy blonde.

"... wouldn't take any help at all!"

One of the friends looked down the alley just as the wind settled.

"Jesus Christ! Is that Ron Weasley?"

"Fuckin' hell," Ron muttered in exasperation.

"You mean...?" Johnny squeaked.

Ron shoved his hoodie over his head, his quick pace from before more of a sprint. The black spots came back with a vengeance, informing him what a terrible idea making his body move like this was.

"W... wait!" one of them called.

Someone grabbed at his jacket. His entire body seemed to jar against the other side of the hoodie forcing his body to a stop from the guy's grip. Ron wasn't sure what to be more frustrated with... the guy or his damn body. Ron pushed the guy off, peeved when the force simply made the other guy step back. With the amount of effort he'd put into that push he'd knocked Death Eaters out cold! Now only a step back? What the fuck?! What was left of his ego just got kicked like an abused puppy.

Completely out of breath and shaking from exertion he was forced to simply lean against the wall. Merlin help him.

"You are Ron Weasley right? The one everyone's been saying disappeared?" The tall brunet demanded.

Johnny came running up with the other two in tow. Ron wilted as he realized he physically couldn't get away.

"Nope..." Ron said breathlessly. "You've got the wrong... guy. Just passing through."

The guy in front of him seemed ready to back off, but a dark skinned younger boy spoke up.

"I've seen a ton of pics of you all over the papers! You look a little different, but you're definitely him! Why'd ya disappear? Too chicken to face the Death Eaters?" the boy mocked.

"You snot nosed little..." Ron growled.

'Johnny' smacked the boy hard on the back of the head.

"This is Ron Weasley you daft idiot! He broke into the Ministry and fought Death Eaters. He fought at the final battle against Voldemort and brought down Fehrir Greyback the most fearsome werewolf there ever was!"

"Doesn't seem like it. Can't even out run you!" The kid said in annoyance rubbing the back of his head.

"Look..." Ron began slowly. "As much as I adore this conversation... I'd just like to be left alone."

"So you're really Ron Weasley?" The brunet asked softly.

Ron held his hands up in surrender.

"The one and only."

"So where'd you go?" Johnny asked.

"And why?" the kid glowered.

"Listen!" Ron tried to yell, but it came out as a cracking rasp instead. Why was this so hard? He used to be able to make nosy busybodies tremble in their shoes just by looking at them! "You've got no right to

know why. So just scoot along, eh?" Instead of intimidating and forceful like it was supposed to sound the words escaped quietly.

"No right?!" The brunet asked incredulously. "You're a big war hero! You... you worked with Harry Potter and Hermione Granger and yet... you were supposed to... I don't know... be somebody!"

' *Ouch...* '

The ache was intensifying. Why'd he have to fucking come out? Why couldn't he just stay at the Burrow like the good little ill person he was? No... he *had* to make sure Kingsley wasn't pushing Harry and Hermione too hard. Then he *had* to go and drop the medicine.

He couldn't help it. His body was really starting to hurt and the black spots were so bad that he could no longer see the boy or Johnny or even the brunet in front of him, so he leaned even more on the wall behind him. He was too tired to argue, too pained to stand up for himself, too weak to shout and scream at them like he wanted to. He wanted to shout at them until he couldn't shout anymore.

What the fuck do you know? What do you know about fighting till even the tips of your fingers feel like they're burning from exhaustion? What do you know about Snatchers throwing curses at you? Death Eaters trying to hunt you down and murder you every second of every day of every month for a year? What the fuck do you know about being tortured day after day when they finally do capture you? About having sadistic men holding your hand and asking you questions... taking the pliers to each finger on that hand and cutting the whole fingernail (including part of the fingers) off one by one as you scream curses and 'I don't know's' and everything but the truth that will get them to stop and just fucking avada kadavra you out of your fucking misery? What do you know about hearing your loved ones scream from torture and being able to do *nothing* ? What the FUCK did they know about watching loved ones die?

"You know nothing," Ron rasped, coldness dripping so thick that all three boys stepped back in response.



"I know quite a bit actually..." the kid said, weary, but not willing to let up against a guy leaning against a wall for support. "I hear you left 'cause you couldn't cut it beside the other two. Couldn't handle the pressure." A harsh wind blew then and hit Ron square in the face. It felt as if the thin strands of wind were crawling under his bandages to seek out the wound there. He felt his hand begin to slide down the wall.

Ron's apparent silence emboldened the snot nosed brat. The kid walked straight up to Ron and got in his face. The other two young men didn't say anything, but they both had a disappointed look upon their faces.

"It's true isn't it? You're a yellow bellied glory hound who just wanted to be Harry Potter's friend for the fame!"

Too hurt and tired to dredge up the energy to reply Ron spit in the boy's face. The howl of outrage was more worth it than his fuzzy mind could have imagined. He blinked and suddenly a fist was heading towards his face.

"Obice!" A voice cried out. A thick barrier formed between him and the three young men before him. Bushy hair flew everywhere as Hermione nearly barreled into him. Ron was torn between wanting to curse, that really bloody hurt, to wanting to hug her. "Get back!" Hermione snapped, her wand pointing at them dead center. There was terror in her eyes as she pulled him close. All of his own anger seemed to drain from him at her presence. Her eyes were scanning his body, ensuring herself that he hadn't been hurt. If he wasn't about to drop it would have been cute.

"Mrs... Mrs. Granger!" Johnny said in astonishment and just the tiniest bit of fear.

That was his girl... was his girl... still kind of is?

"Mrs?" Ron couldn't help but snicker.

"Hush you," Hermione growled, eyes still locked on her 'opponents.' His comment had worked though, she wasn't panicked and knew the situation wasn't serious now. "What *exactly* did you think you were doing?" She hissed.

Ron felt taken aback. Hermione never spoke to people like that, well people outside of... him.

"I... I... we were just asking some questions. No damage done," the brunette stuttered out.

"No damage?!" Hermoine snapped near hysterically.

"No damage Hermione," Ron spoke up. He didn't want Hermione to go on a rant about him being sick. Dear lord he didn't want to think of who could get that information if she did. "Let's just get out of here."

Hermione's deep chocolate brown eyes found his. Understanding seeped through them and she nodded in agreement. Her arm snaked around his waist to subtly support him and he in turn put his arm around her shoulders so that he could lean somewhat against her. To the outside world they simply looked like a couple and not the invalid being supported by the valid. He wondered if his cold body bothered her. Her warmth seemed to emanate off of her even in this cold, giving him strength, and all he wanted to do was snuggle against her for the rest of the journey.

"Why would you want someone like him as your boyfriend?" the kid demanded snidely. "A cowardly loser who can't even defend himself against a couple Hogwarts students?"

His anger roared to life and he felt his face heat up in humiliation. None of the Hogwarts students who disliked him ever had the balls to say it in front of Harry or Hermione and he'd make the little shit pay for being the first. Before he knew it he had his wand pointed at the little brat with the words of a curse he once used on Malfoy about to let loose.

"Don't!" Hermione's voice shrieked in terror. A hand gripped his in an vice like hold. Hermione was still supporting him, but she had her face buried in his chest. The words died on his lips. "Give me your wand Ron," she demanded quietly.

"You know I can't do that," Ron rasped quietly to her. It was true. None of them could handle being separated from their wands.

"Then trust me to handle this. Trust me enough to not use your wand," Hermione breathed. As Ron lowered his wand Hermione raised her own. She looked at the kid with such intensity that all the bravado the brat had seeped right out of him. "You foul little twit, you have five seconds to leave with your friends before I make you wish it were Dementors on your tail," Hermione barked.

The kid didn't need to be told twice.

"You never gave me a head start when you started throwing curses," Ron rasped almost indignantly.

That got the other two moving.

When Hermione tried to move again Ron stilled her, not because he wanted to stop, but because his back couldn't handle going any further. It was screaming at him and he buried his face in her hair to hide the tears that leaked out.

"I dropped my pain reliever potion," Ron rasped into her hair. "I can't... I can't move."

"Oh Ron," Hermione breathed. "I've got you. It's alright. I'll get Harry to grab you more."

Ron laughed hard into her hair as tears continued to leak out.

"And here I thought I'd give Kingsley what's for huh?" Ron said bitterly, trying for a joking tone, but failing miserably. "Thought I'd march up to him after the big speech and rant him into submission."

Hermione said nothing.

"I thought I had enough left for that at least," Ron said through grit teeth. Hermione whispered something and suddenly an otter made of light appeared. As she gave her message to the creature it nuzzled against him, gently preening in the crook of his neck. The light was like a warm breeze against his chilled skin. Then it was gone, into the distance, towards Harry.

"Let's find somewhere warm to sit shall we?" Hermione murmured.

Ron leaned his head against her bushy hair as her arms sneaked around his waist to get a better grip. The first warm place to sit down at was a diner. Hermione walked in with a spell cast on her to make her seem inconspicuous while Ron still had his hoodie pulled well over his head. They found a corner to wait for Harry sitting across from each other.

"Hermione?" Ron prodded gently.

Hermione looked towards him, reaching across the table to grip his cold hands.

"About the letters I sent you..." Ron began. He'd been thinking about this for a long while, but didn't know how to approach the subject or if he even should. His relationship with Hermione wasn't like Harry's. He couldn't just pretend he didn't send them and she wouldn't forget. She'd turn it over in her head over and over against until she exploded in a fire rage of indignant and righteous anger. Her large chocolate brown eyes bore into him with an edge that warned him she was ready to fight. "There still... I can't take you on dates like this or pay for anything or really help you at all... if you want to... you can... I mean you don't have to stay with..."

He was interrupted.

Warm lips were pressed against his and he felt fingers entangling with his hair as hands pulled him closer.

"Ronald..."

Hermione whispered harshly. She was atop the table, looking at him at eye level.

"Weasley..."

Her lips were incredibly and warm as she deepened the kiss. He leaned forward, entangling his own fingers in her beautiful bird's nest of wild curls. He couldn't stand, that hurt too much, but this he could do.

"You complete..." she gasped.

"I know," Ron told her breathlessly.

"Arsehole," her hands had moved down from his hair to the back of his neck before cupping his cheeks.

"I know," Ron agreed, meeting her lips again.

"You are not allowed to die until I let you when we're both too old to go to the bathroom by ourselves. Do you understand me?" Hermione hissed.

Warm tears touched his face, dripping down from her eyelashes. Ron broke the kiss to pull Hermione down toward him so she was sitting atop the table and had her forehead touching his.

"I don't know," Ron confided in her quietly, his voice cracking.

Hermione's jaw clenched tight. He felt her forehead move against his as she nodded in understanding.

"I know," she whispered.

---

For once things felt normal again. The hustle and bustle that came with this day was just like every year. Filled with excited smiles and

anticipation. Christmas Morning Ron found himself opening up a strange contraption. It was silver, metal circle with a lot of smaller silver, metal circles. He understood immediately when his dad sat down next to him grinning like a goof.

*'A muggle thing.'*

"Dumbledore once told me that music is the greatest of magic," Arthur explained excitedly.

Ron nodded indulgently. His dad's face fell a little, making him think he was too obvious about his exasperation. Ron moved closer handing the device over.

"So what does it do?" Ron asked him.

"It's a device that plays music for you," Arthur explained popping one of the cd's into the device. "My mother, your grandma, loved to listen to Christmas carols when she was... when she became ill. She hated being stuck in the house all the time, but when there was music she didn't mind it so much."

There was a pained look on his dad's face as he remembered Ron's late grandmother. Touched at the thoughtful gift Ron pulled the aging man into a bracing hug.

"Thanks... that means a lot," Ron told him.

"I also went through some of the papers Bill brought with him. The recommended food is in a small cabinet for you in the kitchen. Your mother can't get into it."

"You're the best dad."

---

Antea muttered to herself in a mutinous tone as she struggled with the straps on Scathac. Two of her Thestrals were due to have their babies any day now and a hippogriff had badly burned its hind leg

doing god knew what. She needed to head into town to pick up medicine for the hopeless creature, but if one of the ma's went into labor while she was gone there'd be hell to pay.

Logically she knew if she just took a few breaths and had a little bit more patients with the straps she'd probably have gotten the saddle on right ten minutes ago. As it was she only managed to frustrate herself more and more.

"For th' love of god you fuck'in piece o' shit work with me!"

"Need a hand?" A deep voice asked in a French accent.

Antea spun around, then seeing the little pudgy man before her, placed a hand on her chest.

"Creep'in around like that ain't gonna get you any friends stranger. What are you doing here in me grounds?"

"There's someone I'm looking for actually... an old acquaintance of mine. I've been told that you know him."

Antea eyed the man in distaste. Expensive clothes covering a large potbelly and a well-made top hat to hide what was clearly a balding head. Neither helped to cover up the man's long two front teeth though.

"And who is it you've been a' looking for then?" Antea asked, eyebrow raised.

"A young man named Ronald Weasley."

## Listen just listen Ch15

Disclaimer: Under obligation by law I am forced to inform you that I, a random author on fanfiction, do not under any circumstances own anything regarding Harry Potter. That is all.

God dammit! It burns! The lateness of updating burns! A year? Damn.

### Chapter 15: Listen... just listen

"Don't they know how nervous I am, how desperate I am to get this over with, how fragile, skittish, and scared I feel? The first day my wait is forty-five minutes. Often I wait more than an hour for my treatment rooms to open up. The technicians stay the same, the routine stays the same, the out of date magazines stay the same; only the patients in the waiting room keep changing." -Letty Cottin Pogrebin

*Walking into the room of requirements Harry smiled at his decision. It had been a long while since the DA had met up, not since last year when they'd formed it, but Hermione thought it'd be a good idea. A small gathering of close friends, a party of sorts, before everyone headed out for Christmas break.*

*He'd been very specific with his wishes to the room. He'd rather out done himself as well. Mirrors lined every wall from floor to ceiling. Tables were set out and Dobby had gathered plenty of food, too much in fact, to put on top of them. Banners were all over the place. Carefully 'not' just Gryffendor for Luna's sake. Plush chairs sat along the table and there was a music player in the corner.*

*When Hermione entered with the rest of the group, bar Ron, who'd gone to grab some last minute things upstairs. She'd clapped with delight. Neville, Seamus, and Dean joked about his future career as an interior designer.*



*It was such a great feeling. Having everyone about. Dumbledore hadn't bothered him about one of his meetings about Riddle in a while. Draco hadn't been quiet as of late. He was quidditch captain. He'd even been sleeping well the last few weeks. Now if only...*

*"Where is he?" Hermione grumbled in annoyance.*

*If only his two best friends would stop arguing and make up already.*

*"I don't know... just like I didn't know five minutes ago," Harry told her, giving her an annoyed look.*

*"Sorry, it's just... he knew what time he had this planned for. He knew when it started. He said he'd only be a few minutes," Hermione groused.*

*"Why does it matter?" Harry asked, eyebrow raised, "Aren't you mad at him?"*

*"We'll yes, but really, you'd think..." Hermione muttered.*

*That's when the door swung open and Ron walked through the wide doors with an even wider grin on his face, arms loaded with tricks and treats from the Weasley's Joke shop. Ron had claimed to 'borrow' them from the shop one fair day in Diagon Alley and Harry had chosen not to comment on it.*

*Then... suddenly, the arm load of stuff dropped with the smile. Ron's eyes widened in shock before stumbling back. Harry rushed forward. He felt Hermione on his heel. Everyone else in the room had stopped talking, looking up at the loud clatter.*

*"What's wrong?" Harry demanded, looking Ron up and down.*

*Panic flashed in Ron's eyes as he stared at the mirrors around them.*

*"N-nothing, mate, just... startled is all," Ron stuttered, bending down to pick up the items.*

*" By what?" Hermione demanded, bewilderment coloring her words.*

*" By... by what a fantastic job Harry's done with the decorating!" Ron snapped back defensively. "Blokes bound to go places with these skills! Ever consider working in interior mate?"*

*Harry pushed Ron gently, throwing a scowl his way and tossing his hands up in the air at the sound of raucous laughter from behind them.*

*" Don't worry Harry!" Ginny assured from her seat beside Dean. "No matter what career you pick we'll stand behind you!"*

*" Oh, thanks!" Harry bellowed back.*

*Hermione hrumphed as she turned, primly sitting down beside Luna and pointedly away from Ron. His best friend shot her an annoyed glance before moving towards the table and loudly dropping everything in the middle of it. He plopped unceremoniously onto the floor, throwing a challenge at Hermione to say something about it.*

*She didn't. And Harry was very happy about that fact. They didn't need another blow up between the two. They played exploding snaps and ate too much and generally had a ball, but Harry noticed Ron never looked away from the table, he kept his head bowed, eyes focused intensely on nothing.*

*" Ron? You alright?" Harry asked, nudging the taller boy. Ron turned, giving him a strained smile.*

*" Course, why would you ask?" Ron muttered, flipping his card with a little too much force.*

*" You seem tense and you're glaring a hole in the table," Harry pointed out, reasonably.*

*Ron looked up at him, but something behind him spooked Ron and his head shot down again. Harry turned but found only himself and*

*Ron staring back from the mirror.*

*" Just... woke up with a headache..." Ron whispered. "The reflective lights not really helping. Too bright in here."*

*The light clicked on in his brain.*

*' Ohhhh,' Harry looked around at the realization.*

*The room would be a nightmare for anyone with a headache.*

*" Why didn't you say anything before? Geez Ron, we could have covered them easily," Harry laughed. He flicked his wand and instantly the curtains at the top of the room were dropped. Ron's shoulder's sagged in relief the moment they were hidden.*

*" Didn't think of that," Ron said sheepishly.*

*After that Ron seemed to cheer up immensely. Harry could only shake his head at his best friend. Leave it to Ron to miss the obvious and suffer for it. He glanced at Hermione. Suffer a lot.*

---

Australia: Antea's Care grounds for Thestrals and Griffins

"Yeah?" Antea asked, carefully eyeing the little man up. "And whose asking, if ya don't mind me question'en?"

"Tis only natural my dear, only natural," the little man murmured. "I'm... an old friend of Ronald's from the war. Part of the Order, you see. I'm sure he's told you about the Order, no?"

"Not a lick o' information, sorry," Antea drawled. She wrinkled her nose at the smell wafting off the man. A powerful pungent vanilla.

"I suppose that would be the case. So secretive those three... Potter and Granger and Weasley that is. I suppose you, at least, know about them?" The little man asked, large front teeth shining in the dark.

"Aye, but say I believe you're with this 'Order' I still don't think I'll be telling you anything. Sorry," Antea told him bluntly, subtle putting her hand on her wand, hidden within her pocket.

"That is troubling, my dear, very much so. You see, I really do need to see Mr. Weasley. It's important that we talk," the man told her, an edge to his voice making Antea outright pull her wand out.

"I think it's time you go," Antea replied instead. The man seemed unconcerned about the fact that she was now pointing a wand in his face. She took a step back, surprised to find her Thestral fast asleep. She quickly scanned the rest of the group to see that all of her animals had decided a nap would suite them just fine. "What did you do?" she hissed.

"Did Ronald ever tell you he'd been captured?" The French accent of the little man came out thicker this time. He went on without waiting for an answer. "He nearly escaped a few times so we started a bit of a habit you see. We laid down a special kind of enchantment in the lower dungeons. It causes paralysis. It works faster on animals, of course, but the repellent potion for us was so easy to mix that we went with it anyways. Particularly effective for this situation, isn't it?"

Antea stumbled, her legs having gone numb underneath her. She tried to speak, to curse him, but her arms lay limply by her side. Useless. Her body slid to the ground in an ungraceful heap, but she could still see, was still aware of everything even if she couldn't move.

"Do you know how Ronald escaped us?" The little man asked, sitting down almost leisurely beside her. Terror filled her as she tried to will her body into movement, but it would not so much as twitch. "It was after a long torture session. His eyes suddenly turned black, the whites too, and the scars around his arms came alive. It was frightening... and marvelous. Comme... Un dieu des tenebres."

Antea felt a chill run through her body. For herself... for Ron... for her animals. She could feel her wand against her fingertips, not

completely numb, aware enough to know, but not to grasp it. Her mind screamed in frustration.

"Then..." the man said softly, voice becoming bitter. "Then he killed Westerfield without a wand. Just lifted his hand and the tendrils wrapped around him and kept squeezing, until finally blood began to seep out. I was quite close to Westerfield, but that's not quite why I'm here." The man turned to her, scrutinizing her with dispassion. "You see, my dear, Mr. Ronald knows things. He was in the dungeons for a while, but he could hear, and he saw things as well. We thought he would die at the end of our sessions. Never... never did we think he'd escape. Why should we care what the boy knew?"

He laughed then. A half-crazed echo across the empty plains. Antea shivered, not knowing whether anything the man was spouting was true, but somehow instinctively acknowledging it as the truth. The little man nodded to himself, as if he were conversing with his inner thoughts.

"Now I care though, and you should too, because you will tell me or you will pay. I've had lots of practice in torturing people over the last couple of years and I know when I see a talker. You, my dear, you're a talker. Une femme qui s'occupe d'animaux apire a l'oreille de l'homme."

---

The attack happened the day after Christmas. Hermione rolled off the bed to land crotched, wand already in her hand as she looked around. The house was on fire. There were screams coming from downstairs. Hermione shook Ginny awake, putting a finger to her lips. The younger girl nodded, her face pale as she crouched down beside her.

She could hear screaming. Screaming in her family's home. Every fiber of her heart begged her to barge down the way, to leap into action, and destroy the cause. But her mind told her she needed to wait. To know what was going on. Quietly, so quietly, she placed a cooling charm upon her and Ginny's skin. The girl was twitching,

looking to run forward. That Weasley blood just as strong in the youngest.

Hermione placed a hand on the girl, shaking her head. The redhead stilled, slowly nodding her head, though she could see the pain it caused her. She moved forward wordlessly, cracking open a door to see outside. Death Eaters. Dozens of them. Why hadn't they come into their rooms yet?

Ron. Oh, god. Ron couldn't defend himself. Ron was sick. She felt her whole body shudder. She moved forward more, carefully lining her wand with the nearest Death Eater.

"Imperius," She murmured. Beside her, Ginny paled, but said nothing.

Hermione took a deep breath. Then, with a single command, let the Death Eater loose on his associates. Chaos reigned.

She grabbed ahold of Ginny, thrusting the girl upwards where the others were. Trying not to think of whose voice the scream belonged to downstairs. Better to get more of them, be prepared, before starting a counter offensive.

Hands grabbed her. She 'almost' shrieked but kept it in. Bill. He held a finger to his lips. Fleur beside him, held protectively in his arms. Behind him stood George and Mrs. Weasley.

"Out the top window in the attic," Molly announced softly. "We've got brooms beside it, just in case."

She felt respect for the woman go up yet another notch at those words. Hermione nodded. They moved further up together. Silence suddenly and ominously filling the rooms. The controlled Death Eater must have been stopped. They were regrouping. When they reached Harry and Ron's room, Harry was already at the door. Ron though...

"Where's Ron?" Hermione whispered, urgent, near hysterical.

Harry's eyes moved towards the stairs. Downstairs.

"Noooo," she moaned.

"Well get him back," Harry hissed.

Despite his words she felt dread fill her. How many lucky escapes did they have between them? How many close calls did they really possess before one of them died? She turned to the Weasley's with determination growing in her gut.

"Harry and I will stay behind. George," she paused, thinking quickly, "leave a distraction behind to go off in the other direction. Draw them out of the house, but away from you."

George nodded in acceptance and like that they dispersed. Something in the back of her mind told her something was off, wrong, but she shook it from her. Now was not the time. The sound of an explosion rocked her back to her senses. She and Harry rushed down the stairs, armed, attacking with silent spells. Green light flew passed her, but in turn three Death Eaters went down instantly.

She leaped over them, not sparing a glance before halting. She shuddered, gasping, choking, moaning all at once. Ron lay on the ground. Body still, growing cold. Dead. She fell to her knees even as the other Death Eaters approached.

She reached behind her for Harry, but met open air. She turned to glance back, but found he was nowhere to be seen. Black hair, messy and unkept, poked out from atop the stairs. Broken, round glasses lay shattered a few steps down. Her lips trembled. Her arms felt heavy.

Hermione put down her wand, reaching shakily for Ron's stiff hand, grasping it in hers tightly. Blank blue eyes stared back at her. In the moment the green light lit up her vision she thought she felt the hand squeeze hers softly in understanding. She squeezed back.

Then she woke.

She gasped, shuddered, tensed. With a great heave she shot up, hand grasping for her wand. Its tip lit light was raised and ready, threatening any who dared touch her. Then someone did touch her.

Hands too big and fingers too thin. She whirled, hair lashing out to hit the person in the face. A deep, rasping chuckle filled her ears. Wonderful bright blue eyes met her own.

"Ron?" Hermione whimpered.

Ron was sitting on her bed, set up in Ginny's room. The young witch looked shaken, standing by the door, watching them intently, but to her there was only Ron. She buried her face into his bony chest, letting quiet sobs rack her body. Thin arms wrapped tightly around hers. Ron moved closer to her, pulling her against him.

He said something to Ginny, but she didn't know or care what. For some time they stayed like this. Slowly she became aware of a child wailing. Teddy. Ron seemed to notice she'd become coherent because he chose that moment to speak. To distract her from her own mind.

"So Harry, the idiot, fell asleep in the baby's room and then went and had a nightmare," Ron said casually, brushing back her hair. "Then, obviously, that woke me. I stepped into the room with only..." here Ron held two fingers an inch apart. "... this much time to check on him before the baby starts off. So I go and coddle the thing, but it doesn't like me. Hair turns bright red and his lungs go crazy!"

She chuckled. Not because it was funny, but because Ron was trying to make her laugh. And she desperately wanted him to think he'd managed. He grinned at her, too thin face practically glowing in satisfaction.

"You wanna tell me about it?" He asked more softly. She shook her head in his chest. He didn't press. Instead he pressed his lips to her



ear and whispered. "You know, if I remember right, it would be just about this time that I'd take advantage of your vulnerability and throw you against the bed to have my way with you."

This time she did laugh. She snorted unattractively before it burst out into a loud obnoxious thing. She covered her mouth in embarrassment and pleasure, feeling a grin spread across her face.

"You have never done such a thing Ronald," she said in her primmest voice.

"I haven't?" He said, scratching his head in bewilderment. "Why ever not? Its sounds bloody brilliant!"

"We are in your mother's house," she pointed out reasonably.

"It's not as if my five older brothers haven't done worse, probably in this very bed!" Ron retaliated, voice conspiratorial.

"Or Ginny." Hermione whispered.

Ron grimaced, pulling a face.

"Let's not talk about younger siblings like that, shall we?" Ron bargained.

"It's not because she's a girl?" Hermione demanded, eyebrows raised.

"She's my sister! That is an entirely different species of females I care not to think about in your position. Especially since the male involved is Harry. Thank you very much." Ron rasped, imitating her prim voice quite well, his warm breath tickled her ear. She glanced upside down at the still, slightly ajar door. Ginny no where in view. She flicked her wand, sealing it shut with magic, before silencing the room for good measures.

Ron's eyes danced with a glint of mischief there she hadn't seen in a long time. He leaned over her, kissing her roughly against the lips.

She pushed her fingers through his hair, cradling the back of his head, letting her other hand trail down to his shirt. She pushed it up, feeling his ribs... suddenly Ron pulled away.

His cheeks were flushed, but now it wasn't with excitement. He was pulling down his shirt firmly. She sat up, confused and concerned, but also hurt.

"Ron?"

"This was a bad idea," Ron muttered, scooting a few feet away from her.

She felt panic seize inside of her.

"What?! Our relationship?"

His eyes shot up, startled.

"No! No, not that, I mean..." Ron trailed off, he pushed his hands through his hair in aggravation. "Can we just... I don't know... can we keep our clothes on? Let's just... let's not do anything..." Ron trailed off uselessly.

She didn't understand. Why would he...? She studied him. He was avoiding looking at her. Bandaged arms self-consciously crossed over his chest. His good arm hiding the bad one.

"Are you hurting?" Hermione whispered. Guilt consumed her as she gazed at his battered form. "Did I hurt you?"

He shook his head, going redder in the face.

"No, nothin' like that 'Mione," he smiled tightly at her.

Her chest tightened in turn. Hermione crawled closer, wrapping Ron in her arms, bony shoulders tensed under her hold. She listened to his steady heartbeat, let it sooth her, before she simply sat beside him in silence.

Never one to be patient for answers it had taken years and many rants from Harry for her to learn that Ron would just bury the truth deeper if she tried to dig for it. Silence proved more fruitful when chipping away at the red head. As long as he could get the words organized in his head in his own time then it would just tumble out. Merlin if only she'd learned the trick years ago.

In the same way she expected him to ask her what her problems were he had expected her to just tell him in her own time what was up. If they'd just come to accept that they worked in different ways instead of becoming aggravated by the way each person functioned then so much time, so much effort could be avoided.

"I don't..." Ron started then stopped. Hermione said nothing. She just leaned in more, wrapped her fingers around his, let him backtrack. After several long drawn out minutes he started again. "I don't feel human right now." Ron confided in the smallest of whispers.

Hermione stilled in surprise.

"I feel like a monster. Like I want to hide away, like Lupin, until it all passes. I feel like a freak walking around looking like..." Ron grimaced, gesturing to his various bandages, the heavy scarring, the small splotches of blood stains. His emaciated form: all bones and angles. "It feels wrong for you to touch me. Dirty somehow... I..."

She pulled him towards her, fury running through her veins as she glared at not just her boyfriend, but one of her best friends since childhood.

"Now you listen to me Ronald Weasley and you listen good," she shook him when his eyes avoided hers. "You are no less a person than the day I met you. You are strong and brave and terribly idiotic at times and this is one of those times. I love every inch of you, scar covered or freckle pasted or whatever else you decide needs adding while we grow older. You hear me Ronald?"

She brushed her lips against his, touching their foreheads together, staring into his big, sad blue eyes. The message wasn't sinking in, she could tell.

"Every inch!" She repeated in frustration.

"I hate it when you call me Ronald," Ron said, instead of responding.

"I hate it when you avoid me in arguments," she shot back.

"I seriously doubt either of us are going to stop anytime soon," he said, pulling away from her. "Go back to sleep Hermione." His hand lingered only a moment on hers before she found herself alone in the room. Dimly she became aware that the sound of Teddy's cries had stopped and at some point Ginny had reentered the room.

It was as she lay there trying to will herself into sleep that she realized what had bothered her most about the dream. The odd thing out. The Weasleys' would never have left Ron during an attack. Never. Not for any reason. They would not have left any of them behind. The thought comforted her to her very core in the same measures it scared her. The Weasleys, her family, would not abandon them. That kind of back up sent a thrill of warmth to her heart. It was this thought that finally lulled her into sleep.

---

"So what is this exactly?" Harry asked, fiddling nervously with his wand. Around them wizards and witches were staring and whispering amongst themselves in the waiting room. It was enough to make Ron wish he'd taken some kind of polyjuice potion. He glared heatedly at the passing people, daring them to say anything to either of them, but they seemed content to simply stare from afar. He pulled his jacket closer and pulled the hood further down over his face. He'd rather not have people find out he was back in town quite yet thank you very much. Hopefully the jackasses he'd met in the crowd wouldn't go around screaming about their 'meeting.'

"Physical therapy," Ron replied, feeling a look of disgust flickering across his face. Harry gave him his own personal glare as he stuffed his wand back into his pocket. Not too far away though, never too far away. Ron sighed. "Walking across the room. Forcing my legs into weird position. Trying to get my left arm to function okay again. Stuff like that," Ron muttered reluctantly.

"What's the point in doing that if there just going to tear your arm apart again?" Harry questioned, voice so soft Ron had to strain to hear it. He looked over at his best friend to find him glaring a hole into the floor. He nudged the raven haired teen with his right, functioning arm and when Harry looked up gave him a weak smile.

"Thanks for coming with me," Ron told him sincerely. "I don't think I'd have made it with the lot of them dramatizing every step." Harry pulled his hand through his hair, irritably tugging through a tangle, before curtly nodding his head. Ron tapped his foot nervously, not sure if Harry was still boiling with anger towards him or just severely mad. He pulled the quibbler from his pocket, the familiar pages making him smile. He hadn't had any of his favorite papers to read in nearly a year and a half. The war hadn't exactly been friendly towards newspapers after all. What happened to Mr. Lovegood was a sure sign of that.

"So when you get in there, they're going to force you to do all that stuff and exhaust yourself when you're so sick? That's what it's all about? What's the point of that? You can't even... doesn't it hurt?" Harry ranted, voice dripping in irritation.

Ron put down the paper, giving up on it to really look at Harry. There were bags around his eyes that were so dark and long that he probably hadn't slept at all since Ron had arrived with Bill and George three days ago. His hair, if possible, looked in a much greater disarray than what he remembered. He'd lost weight too, not as horrifyingly dramatic as Ron's weight loss, but still significant. Their time apart hadn't been kind to him.

"What's this really about mate," Ron rasped in his damaged voice. "I told you they need to do this because I'll lose the ability to work my limbs if I don't. You know that. So what's this really about?"

"Does it hurt?" Harry repeated, an edge to his voice.

"Yeah, it hurts. It really fucking hurts," Ron told him, shrugging his shoulders helplessly.

Harry slammed his fist into the arm of the chair he sat on in anger. Taken aback by the reaction Ron stared at Harry speechless. He was bent forward now, the wand was out again, rolling between his fingers. He kept glancing at him and Ron waited nervously for the bite.

"Then why exactly," Harry spit out viciously, "is it that you waited so long. Why did you not say a damn thing when it mattered. Now you have to do this!" Harry spread his arms out wide to emphasize not just the waiting room of St. Mungo's, but beyond.

And there was the bite.

"Do you have to do this *here* ?" Ron demanded incredulously.

"Because... because Ginny went to a mind healer," Harry whispered.

"A what?!" Ron hissed, thrown by the thrust of the conversation.

"A mind healer!" Harry snapped.

"Wha' she do that for?" Ron asked in bewilderment. "And what does that have to do with this?"

"She went because I mentioned they used pensive to help analyze patient's memories from an outside point of view. Get some perspective on how the person acted from a third person point of view. She wanted to check something that was bothering her. She went and she followed you in her memory!" Harry explained hotly.

"Soooo...?" Ron drawled, playing dumb, he had an idea now of how Ginny knew about the figure.

"Sixth year! After one of our quidditch practices? Ringing any bells?" Harry demanded.

"Not a single blasted one mate," Ron rasped in exasperation.

"You acted like an ass all through practice," Harry reminded.

"Doesn't narrow it down much," Ron muttered. Harry growled in annoyance, his wand sparking at the end. "For fucks sake Harry, just tell me what she saw!" Ron cried out, throwing his hands in the air in frustration.

"She saw *you* practically collapsed on the floor of the boy's locker room, gripping your scars like they were burning you!" Harry snapped. Silence fell between them as Harry glared intensely at him, daring him to contradict what was said. Ron opened his mouth several times to respond, but each time his breath simply tumbled out with no words. "That far back! You knew that something was wrong and you could have done something about it before it got this bad!" Harry accused. "You wouldn't be... ! You wouldn't be so close to dying! You wouldn't be like this if you'd just spoken up!"

"But I didn't!" Ron snapped, finally getting his voice back. "I didn't and it sucks but I fucked up and now I have to deal with it. Is that what you want? You want me to admit I was stupid and should have done it a different way!? Guess what! I already know!"

"Ronald Weasley?" One of the healers called.

"Here!" Ron rasped as loud as he could. Without glancing at Harry he stood up and marched across the room, nearly giving the nurse a grateful smile as he entered. He could hear Harry shuffling in behind him, but didn't want to turn and see or hear his reply.

"Mr. Delvo sent us all of your information Mr. Weasley. You'll be working on your arm mostly today," the healer announced. He didn't bother to reply, aware by now that there was no point. The healers never waited for his reaction on anything, they just expected him to follow. When they entered a large room with various odd equipment atop the surface of one table in the center of the room he moved towards it without being told. "Mrs. Gates will be with you shortly."

Beside him Harry slipped into a seat. Ron silently began taking off his hoodie, maneuvering his left arm carefully out of the sleeve, before resting it on the table. There were splashes of blood across the white cloth, he should have changed them and applied the salve this morning, but since he knew he was coming in there was little point. Harry stared at the arm blankly before his eyes seemed to wander over the rest of him. Ron subconsciously turned away from his best friend.

When the healer, Mrs. Gates walked in, Ron immediately recognized her. She'd been in the hospital room with him when he'd been diagnosed all those months ago. She'd spoken kind words to him in that distant, sympathetic, but uncomprehending voice he'd come to associate with many of the healers. It wasn't bad, but it wasn't empathy.

"Hello Mr. Weasley, it's good to see you again," Mrs. Gates murmured softly as she sat down. Harry gave him a questioning look, but he ignored it. He nodded to her greeting before placing his arm on the table. She hum'd at the bandages, fingers skillfully beginning to unwrap it.

"You can leave Harry," Ron announced, already knowing that the other teen wasn't going anywhere.

"Not likely," Harry replied automatically.

"I'm going to need you to stretch your arm out all the way towards me please," Mrs. Gates announced. Ron did so with difficulty, displaying the grisly scene of his arm for Harry to see. The arm was



shaking, parts swollen and discolored, with a nasty wound in the middle of his forearm. There were older spots and areas that were scarred showing where previous wounds had been. He wondered if Ron's whole body would look like this when they finished the treatment. The thought was horrifying. He remembered seeing the same thing on his back and the place over his lungs.

"Aren't you going to replace the bandages?" Harry asked, trying to hide how revolted he was by the open wound.

"It would just mess up the bandages in a few minutes mate. No point to it until it's over," Ron rasped.

"Course," Harry muttered.

"Clench your fingers into a fist," Mrs. Gates commanded.

Ron tried to, the fingers moving inwards, but not quite clenching. Mrs. Gates gently wrapped her hands around Ron's and forced them into the position. Ron hissed in pain, but didn't otherwise comment.

"Again please," Mrs. Gates said.

The attempt was better this time, but he still couldn't force his fingers into that position. Once more Mrs. Gate carefully forced his fingers into the spot. Harry could hear the sound of grinding teeth as the trembling seemed to get worse. Silently Mrs. Gate pulled out a mouth guard from her pocket. Ron didn't hesitate, popping the instrument into his mouth with his right hand as he continued forcing himself to close his fist with the left.

"Bring your arm towards you," Mrs. Gate said decisively.

Harry watched as Ron complied. He'd never seen Ron follow instructions so diligently. No comments or remarks... just obedience. He didn't like it one bit.

"Reach out towards me again, but don't let your arm drop or drag along the table," Mrs. Gates said.

He did it once, twice, seven times before his arm touched the surface of the table. She instructed him to clench his fist again, nearly successful this time, but not quite. So she demanded he do it again and six more times after that. Harry winced every time Ron shuddered from pain. When the wound began to bleed and drip onto the table, but neither of them showed signs of stopping Harry had to speak up.

"Don't you think that's enough?" he asked.

"We have a blood replenishing spell Mr. Potter. Mr. Weasley isn't in any danger," Mrs. Gate told him patiently.

"That's not what I meant. He's sick... I don't see why these exercises have to be done while he's ill. Can't they wait until after he's better?" Harry demanded.

Ron and Mrs. Gate exchanged a look that he couldn't decipher. Ron pulled the mouth guard from between his teeth before shakily standing.

"I think you should wait outside, mate. 'S better that way," Ron rasped.

"Mr. Weasley's right. We've barely begun the rehabilitation exercises Mr. Potter and if you can't handle being here it would be best that you wait outside," Mrs. Gate said in a gentle, but powerful voice.

"I can handle it, but I just don't see the point in... I mean look at him!" Harry demanded, pointing a finger at Ron's emaciated body. "He's not fit to be out of bed! He's vomiting all the time. He's barely strong enough to walk here with me! He's having trouble moving his arm for Pete's sake! Rehabilitation is supposed to be after they've gotten better!"

"After an accident yes, after something where the person gets continuously better, that is the best route to take," Mrs. Gates explained sharply. "Mr. Weasley is not going to get better though... not for a long time. He's going to get worse actually. Right now we have to take the opportunity to help him get as strong as he can before he gets worse. He only has a forty percent chance of surviving this. The emergency surgery they had to perform on him a month ago severely weakened his body and cut his chances by ten percent making it only thirty. Forcing him to do these exercises strengthens his body and has brought his chances back up to forty. I'm going to have to ask you to leave now Mr. Potter. Mr. Weasley will be out in an hour or so."

"I'm not..." Harry began, thoroughly put in his place, but unwilling to leave.

"Just get out for now okay?" Ron cut in.

"Ron..."

"Get out Harry!"

Without Ron to distract him he was much more aware of the many eyes following him in the waiting room. It was made worse when he began to pace back and forth from one end of the large room to the other. Towards the end of the hour Harry had at some point pissed off one of the medics enough that they snapped at him. Harry Potter or not he was not allowed to disturb the sick waiting to be treated. So he sat grumpily peering at the door until a reporter managed to squeeze their way into the hospital.

He cursed as he saw the man casually making his way to the empty seat beside him. There was a camera held securely to his chest, out of sight to the medics, but not to his eyes. His eyes had been on the man from the moment he'd entered the room. It was one of the more persistent ones. A rookie looking for a scoop to give him a name and who believed that following scraps of info on Harry Potter would get him that name.

Harry stood abruptly. The reporter moved a little faster. A brisk walk took him up to the very vocal nurse who eyed him wearily. He gave the women his most charming smile, which seemed to make the weariness increase.

"My friend should be just about done. Do you think I could go in there to pick him up?" Harry wedeled.

"Just about done doesn't mean done Mr. Potter," the healer simpered.

"I understand that, but there's a man here whose a reporter. I need to get my friend out the back door before they try anything," Harry hurriedly explained, ditching charm for truth.

Eagle like eyes followed Harry's own to the man moving towards them. If the look she'd given Harry had been unpleasant then the look she gave this man was just downright hostile. She gestured with her head for him to go in to which he gave her a grateful smile. As the reporter tried to follow Harry through the doors the woman adjusted her clothes before standing firmly between them.

Nearly bolting to the rehabilitation area of the hospital Harry was surprised to see Ron actually was outside of the doors. He was covered in sweat from head to toe and breathing raggedly, but standing at least. Ron brushed a hand through his slightly damp hair and gave him a weak smile.

"We need to go," Harry told him urgently.

"Wha...? Why?" Ron asked.

It was like the flip of a switch. Ron's blue eyes became focused and icy as he pulled his wand out from his robes. Harry stared at it incredulously, giving Ron a hard stare.

"Why do you have that on you?" Harry hissed.

"What's going on?" Ron countered.

"Reporters Ron! Why do you have a wand on you? Bill said that the infection will hurt you if you use magic right now!" Harry growled.

"For emergencies!" Ron shot back.

At the sound of shouting from the waiting room Harry grabbed Ron by the shoulders and ushered him towards the back exit of the hospital before Ron could even finish putting his jacket back on.

"Oi! What the fuck?!" Ron demanded, voice cracking again. Harry was forced to half carry Ron as he tried to maneuver them away from the damn persistent reporter. It wasn't until Ron's ragged breathing deteriorated into coughs that he slowed them down. Looking over at his best friend Harry saw how pale and worn out he was. Almost all of Ron's weight was on him now. Ron was shaking his head as he tried to catch his breath. Bringing them into a seemingly quiet hallway Harry helped Ron sit down.

Ron pulled out a bottle of water, nursing it as he tried to catch his breath. There were questions in his eyes, but not enough air to say them. Harry muttered a spell to surround them as he sat down beside Ron.

"A new Rita Skeeter has been on my tail for a while," Harry said, trying to give Ron a reassuring smile. Ron simply nodded, leaning his head against the wall and closing his eyes. His shoulder began to tilt until much of Ron's weight was once more against him. "You doing alright?" Harry asked quietly.

Ron nodded rather than put effort into talking. They stayed that way for a while, until Ron's breathing evened out. For a moment Harry thought Ron was asleep right there on the bench of the hospital, but tired blue eyes cracked open and a moan escaped cracked lips as Ron forced himself to stand. Harry did as well, supporting Ron as best he could.

"You and your bloody paparazzi," Ron growled, but there was a grin on his lips.

"Yours too now buddy," Harry chuckled.

"Na' aah," Ron argued tiredly. Harry began to laugh harder until Ron's weight suddenly fell fully on him. He grabbed the red head around the waist as panic arose. Ron's legs were no longer holding him up at all. "'orry, my fee' aren't working with me," Ron mumbled, "wasn't ready to move yet."

"That's okay, I've got you," Harry told him. They sat down at a bench near the exit. Ron's head fell on his shoulder almost automatically.

"Not gonna get home anytime soon are we?" Ron asked, a guilty grin on his face.

"I've got you," Harry repeated, still shaken, and unsure how else to react.

"Is usually like this," Ron brushed it off, "it's usually done in my room though. At the 'ospital I mean. Never gone anywhere... after." Harry cast a concealing spell around them before thinking about it for a second and adding a forgetful charm as well. "Constant Vigilance!" Ron snickered.

"Did they give you something?" Harry wondered out loud, staring at his friend uncertainly.

"Muscle relaxing potion... light pain reliever too. I'm just tired Harry, not high."

"Explains why you suddenly dropped like that," Harry muttered.

"My fault, forgot ta tell you 'bout that," Ron rasped.

"How long will it be before you're okay again?"

Ron snorted in laughter against his shoulder.

"How long till it wears' off?" Harry corrected.

"A bit, suppose I could try to get to that little food place, done the street, yeah? You can get lunch or somet'in," Ron slurred, pushing himself up and taking a deep breath.

"We don't have to go anywhere," Harry said jumping up.

"But it would be better, right?" Ron asked, hand gripping Harry's shoulder to keep balanced. "More interesting than staring at the freaking white walls around here anyway." Harry stood up and gripped Ron around the waist, pulling his arm over his shoulders. Ron's eyes shined with gratitude as they moved out of the hospital, the spells moving with them. It was really easy actually, now that he knew Ron would be putting all of his weight on him, to carry Ron out onto the streets.

"You think you could try eating something Ron?" Harry pleaded.

"I'm not really..." Harry heard Ron trail off as the redheads eyes looked him over. "Hot tea helps. I can usually manage things that don't taste too strong too."

Harry smiled gratefully at Ron.

When they entered the small restaurant Harry moved them to the back where they were least likely to be noticed by other patrons of the place and removed the spells. Ron practically melted into his own chair, slumping into the seat and shoving his head into his arms.

"Light soup then," Harry said thoughtfully. "Is broth okay?"

"Sounds delightful mate," Ron snarked.

"Oi! None of that," Harry laughed, nudging Ron a bit.

"Can't wait until I can eat real food again," Ron moaned. "Pot pie, creamy pumpkin juice, I'd even happily eat roast beef."

"Glad to see Ron Weasley's still hidden somewhere under that pile of bones," Harry teased.

That was when the persistent, wanna-be Rita Skeeter, reporter came barrowing through the door out of breath. Harry cursed. Ron looked up, staring at the man half-heartedly as he marched over to them despite all the magical protection. Little shit probably somehow managed to put a tracker of sorts on him.

"Sir, Harry Potter sir, may I please... is that... Ron Weasley?!"

Harry glared at the man as he cast a detection spell upon himself. Hah! There it was. On the bottom of his pants.

Both he and Ron glowered at the man before them. There was the sound of a click as the man took a picture, much to Harry's amusement, of himself and Ron flipping the man the bird at the same time. God, he'd missed his best friend.

"We're eating, please leave," Harry told the man sternly.

"That is Ron Weasley, isn't it?" The man asked, eagerly wanting to confirm.

"He said to fuck off, ya bloody wanker!" Ron snapped.

"Ah, yes, I see it is," The reporter exclaimed excitedly.

Ron gave the man an incredulous look, raising both eyebrows at Harry.

He couldn't help it. He laughed, harder than since before the final portion of the war.

"So," the reporter nudged, "a moment, please?!"

"Here's your moment," Ron snapped flicking his wand out. Before Harry could stop him, he made a swift motion causing the young man to yelp in surprise as his camera flew from his hands to fly out



the door of the restaurant. The camera smashed with a nasty crunch against the cobbled streets. "Go fetch!" The reporter sent Ron a glare before rushing outside after his equipment. There was a very self-satisfied smirk upon Ron's face even as the redhead slumped sideways to lean on a wall.

"Ron!" Harry hissed.

"Make your voice squeak a little more and you'll have your Hermione impersonation done just right," Ron joked, giving Harry a sidelong glance.

"You blasted idiot!" He raged.

"See, ya got it!" Ron congratulated, patting Harry's head lightly, but looking far less cocky and a lot more pale than a minute ago. "I don't suppose we could sit down for a minute before he comes back."

Harry hauled Ron over to the benches where the red head slumped immediately, head going in his arms.

"That hurt a bit more than the last time I did a spell," Ron admitted, shaken.

They sat in silence for a long while before Harry shifted awkwardly in his seat, trying to find the right words.

"So," he started, "it's your turn to drag us down into some crazy shit, huh?"

Ron grunted in reply.

"I told you what was going on, you knew what you were getting into, are you going to do the same for me?" Harry asked, as calmly as possible.

One blue eye opened, weary and guarded, but it was never supposed to be guarded against him.

"You never asked."

Harry flinched.

"What?"

"About me and Hermione. After the department of mysteries you never asked us what happened. We thought you were just... traumatized by Sirius death, but even after you seemed alright, you never asked us. Hermione never asked me either."

"Asked what happened? I was there!" Harry snapped, suddenly defensive.

"You weren't. You weren't with us. And that's fine. I'm not blaming you for it or anything, but I'm just saying, if you'd wanted to know what happened to me then you would have asked me," Ron said carefully.

"So since I didn't ask you what happened in the department of mysteries then that gives you the go ahead to hide the fact that you were hurting all through sixth year and the hunt?" Harry demanded incredulously.

"I didn't want my family to know, but I didn't do much to hide it from you and Hermione. Only the really bad ones did I hide. The other ones..." Ron shrugged his shoulders, staring at the table, a little resentment showing through. "I tried to tell you and her. When we were entering the great hall for the first feast... when I tried to quit the quidditch team I tried to tell you, but you wouldn't listen. There were a few times after quidditch when it hurt real bad, I tried to tell you. And then we started making plans about hunting Hocrux's, you see, and I became terrified. I didn't want you to leave me behind."

Harry felt his head swim. He didn't want to think about it. But he hadn't had he? He'd been so shocked and... and hurt by Sirius death in Dumbledore's office. When the man told him Hermione and Ron were fine he'd taken him for his word. He'd just... he hadn't even

asked. It had been Dumbledore who brought up his friends. Afterwards he hadn't even really thought about the aftereffects of their injuries.

"We'd never have left you, never," Harry claimed, fierce and protective.

"You tried even before you knew. I had to talk you out of it, remember? I wouldn't have made it a year without you guys. I wouldn't have been able to," Ron explained, blue eyes pleaded with him to understand.

"You still tried this year didn't you?" Harry shot back, bitterness slipping through.

"And how many meetings have you missed so far with me here?" Ron asked.

That stopped him short.

"How many missions have you turned down? This week? Today?" Ron questioned.

*' Every one of them,'* he answered silently.

"It's the holidays Ron, there are no missions," Harry said instead.

Ron snorted.

"I don't think you and Hermione should be pushed and bullied into so many things, but that doesn't mean I don't want you working at your dream jobs either," Ron told him.

The waitress came over. Harry ordered a few waters and two bowls of soup. She wrote them down hurriedly, blushing at Harry as she turned to rush away. Harry took the moment to get a better look at their surroundings, more interested in getting them in, then knowing what the 'in' was. That's when he saw it. A mirror. It was set into their benches of the booth they'd chosen. A line of reflective glass. Harry

glanced at Ron whose eyes seemed to casually and naturally avoid it.

A memory floated to the surface of a party he and the other DA members held in sixth year. A room full of mirrors.

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"What was the shadow Ginny saw... that... that you see?" Harry asked, having struggled to accept the fact that Ron did see it when he looked in the mirror.

Ron pushed back from the table, a troubled look crossing his gaunt face.

"It's not really a big deal. It's an afterimage of the brains original holder. A play on some of his memories. That's what Pomfrey said anyways," Ron shrugged carelessly.

"Pomfrey knew about it?" Harry demanded, enraged.

"It's not like what Voldemort was trying to do to you Harry," Ron sighed. "It's... well there's no defense mate. No Ligilimacy could help with it, ya know? It's just a permanent side effect I have to learn to live with."

"But what exactly is he? What does he do? Does he ever... hurt you? Is he in control of your scars? Who is he?" Harry demanded, frustration showing through. Ron was being so damned... casual about it. It was starting to freak him out.

"I'm not sure who he is, but... he mumbles sometimes. Wisp of thoughts or memories. Reminds me of Hermione a bit, actually, he was a researcher of some type. Liked to invent or improve upon things," Ron said thoughtfully. Was it just Harry or did Ron seem to be a bit excited about it. He had a light in his eyes that Harry couldn't remember seeing in a very long time.

"So he just sorta shadows you then? I mean... we can find a way to get rid of him. Hermione at least, would be able to find a way to get rid of him," Harry said carefully, weary of Ron's sudden change of mood.

"He doesn't... hurt per say," Ron said carefully, fidgeting nervously, "But sometimes... well.... He sort of..."

"What?" Harry snapped.

Ron laughed a little then, a slightly hoarse laugh, before sending him an uncertain sort of half smile.

"Well, mate, here's the thing... you're gonna think it's kinda funny, ya know? Cause I'm just so naturally klutzy, so for me to have something so..."

"Stop! Stop stalling, what is it?" Harry asked, getting anxious.

"Ah..." Ron paused, his fidgeting stilled. "Do you remember the curse I got hit with? Before the brain attacked me?"

Harry nodded.

"We'll the funny thing is, you'll laugh I swear, you know how we thought I summoned the brain 'cause the spell made me go all ditzy?"

There was that half grin again and it was really starting to scare the shit out of him.

"We'll as it turns out it didn't actually make me ditzy... it was a spell or well... a combination of spells I got hit with that sort of attracted dark magic to me. I didn't summon it on a whim, it was the spells seeking out the... um... the darkest magic in the room and... don't give me that look... it um... sort of absorbed it... or well, I did, at any rate."

Harry felt himself pale as he stared at Ron in horror.

"And the dark tendrils in my scars kind of absorbed the spell and made it... slightly permanent. And... well, it's why I was attracted to the love potion because it had strengthened and gone from something innocent to a sort of dark magic. And of course... well there was a ton of dark magic in the mead and the moment my hand touched it I wanted it... and well... the locket... yeah... but it wasn't really because I have bad luck mate! Isn't that funny? We thought all this time it was bad luck and what not... but..." Ron stopped as he caught sight of him. When the waitress came over with two glasses of water Harry practically lurched out of his seat to take a deep gulp of the cool liquid to get the slight taste of vomit at the back of his throat to go down.

He caught sight of Ron, shaking just as badly as himself, still trying his damnest to smile as if it were a joke.

"It's funny," Ron insisted hoarsely, "because I've always been a klutz so I blamed it on myself, but it's all been connected from the get go. Every wound... every scar I've got, it's because I'm an 'actual' magnet for trouble! Get it?"

Ron forced out another laugh, his eyes begging Harry to go along with it, but all Harry could do was shake his head in silent, horrified realization.

"That's why Pomphrey didn't recognize it as an infection. Because at first, it wasn't. But each time someone did something bad... he... the shadow I mean, would sort of just pull it in which jump started the infection."

"Oh god," Harry muttered.

"He, the shadow, it's not until the dark magic touches him that he gets a little dangerous," Ron mumbled. "That's why my scars started hurting at school though," Ron added, pretending like Harry was going along with him. "Because of Defense against the dark arts, of all things. Then the battles of course, and the other stuff like the

poison, but it was just little stuff really, here and there, that wore down my body."

Their waitress came back, putting two bowls of soup in front of them. Neither of them touched it.

"So the brain..." Harry trailed off, shuddering.

"Belonged to the man, right."

"We'll figure out how to get rid of the shadow," Harry declared, decisively. This he could fight. There was someone to defeat, to beat back and win against. It wasn't an illness eating away at his best friend with no clear direction to go in.

He was disappointed by Ron's reaction though.

"Whatever makes you feel better mate. I'll go along it, if it makes you feel better."

Harry took Ron back to their apartment rather than the Burrow. It would be quieter, less chaotic. Besides he had a surprise in mind.

Ron began to slip. He readjusted him. The red head's legs dangling limply in his grasp. Ron's arms loosely hung around him shoulders, hot, fevered breath tickling his ears.

"Almost there," Harry said, more to himself than the sick young man on his back.

Even with their close proximity he didn't hear the mumbled response, so soft was it spoken. Damp red hair slid gently against his cheek. Ron had finally lost the battle with consciousness.

Going through the barriers and enchantments Harry only had a hard time when it came to pulling out his wand. He tried removing it from his pocket without rousing his sleeping friend, but it remained stuck fast in its depths. Sighing he nudged Ron regrettably.

"Ron, mate, wake up for a minute."

Half lidded eyes cracked open to reveal overly bright blue eyes.

"At ta 'ospital?" Ron slurred.

"Just came from there. I need to lower you for a second."

"M'kay. Is almost over?"

At this he had no idea what to say. The day? The treatment? Their walk?

"Yeah, almost over," Harry told him.

He lowered Ron to the ground, gently removing the arms around his neck to lay them carefully beside him. Ron tried to sit up on his own, but he bodily flinched before going still.

"Just a moment Ron, I'll get the pain reliever as soon as we into the apartment," Harry muttered. He was sure that all his mutterings was for his benefit.

"Air feels like molasses," Ron mumbled in annoyance. "Hate this."

Harry felt his throat tighten up. He kneeled down in front of Ron, the ragged breathing worrying him.

"Ron," Harry called. He went ignored. Ron was staring blankly into space. "Ron!" he called out urgently, tapping Ron's cheek. Overly bright eyes focused on him.

"Since you used magic, is there anything other than your normal potions I should give you?" Harry demanded, pulling Ron's arm over his shoulder and hefting the taller young man up. Ron's legs stumbled under him, but he held strong, supporting him as he steadied himself.



"Three oz. brown potion, one oz. purple, chill together six minutes," Ron listed off absentmindedly.

When they got inside Ron practically melted into his couch. He was out before he even hit the comforter. Harry ran his hands through his hair, staring down at him for what felt like ages, but was probably no more than five minutes.

Light lit up the room. He didn't flinch or panic though. The magic was familiar. An otter patronus floated into the room. It nuzzled Ron's cheek affectionately, seeming to whine when it got no response, before dragging itself over to him. The creature chirped at him at him fondly then sitting on its hindquarters and opening its mouth.

"I'll be home in a bit. I've managed to convince the Weasley's to let us have him to ourselves the next few days. George will no doubt barge in at some time. I think we can do this Harry. I really do."

Her confidence made him feel lighter. The otter danced around him happily before trailing out of existence.

"I hope so," Harry said quietly to the silent room.

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Hermione tapped her foot impatiently, giving her poor assistant a glare as she fumbled the stack of sheets. The woman readjusted her glasses, stuttering apologies before thumping the papers down to straighten them.

"She cringed. Snatching the papers away she pointedly tapped the papers down. Straightening them without bending the bottom. It was really no wonder the woman was three times her age and still working as an assistant. If she couldn't even straighten papers without damaging them. What was the point in alphabetizing and highlighting them if people treated her work like trash?

More to the point! This woman was late filing so now she was forced to stay late filing. This woman had delayed her in her plans with Ron

and Harry.

The woman in question meekly turned and left the room. Hermione flicker her wand, slamming the door behind her. She heard a small, satisfying squeak come from the other side. Hurriedly she went to work. Thankfully the profiles were ones she was familiar with, otherwise the process would have taken hours, today it took fifteen minutes. She may have cut a few corners.

Upon the final signature she practically leaped from her chair. Gathering her things her small office locked itself behind her with a flurry of wind at her heels. Protective spells and one of the twin's finest works guarding the entryway left her able to leave with peace in mind of the precious information well-kept safe.

Exiting the Ministry she noted, with just the tiniest bit of distaste, that her assistant was still in the process of packing up. She did not like idle people. More often than not their lack of work ethic negatively impacted those around them. Such as the case today.

She disappeared the moment she was far enough away. This was so exciting! Their guest would be there any minu... now. He was here now. She beamed as she saw Hagrid standing in front of their apartment complex. Straightening up her clothes and smoothing her bushy hair down she strolled towards him with a bit of perk in her step. He was in his best, hair covered suite and held a large bouquet of wild flowers in his hands.

A small part of her hurt for the big guy. McGonagall had once confided in them that Hagrid did not have a friend outside of the Order and even then he'd not been invited to any home outside of Order business. They'd made a pack that day to invite him at least once a month. Since the end of the war they'd had yet to keep that promise, but since things had finally settled down, at least in the country, they'd decided now would be the time to start. When he caught sight of her, he waved one giant hand, a broad grin stretching across his face.

"Well fancy seeing you here 'ermione. Don't suppose I could come inside for a spot of your lovely tea," Hagrid said loftily, eyes twinkling in delight. Hagrid thrust the flowers into her arms. They nearly smothered her, much larger in her hands than Hagrids, the large petals engulfing her face. She peered around it to see Hagrid scratching his chin.

"I didn't know what ya three would want as a housewarming gift so I just got ya somet'in to brighten the room."

"Their lovely Hagrid," Hermione told him in her sincerest voice.

He beamed at her, seemingly pleased with himself, before Hermione led him inside. Hagrid's cheerful demeanor dimmed a bit as they entered the living room.

"Hagrid, ya old dog! How have you been? Bloody hell it's been ages mate!" Ron called out from the couch, a grin splitting his face.

"Hermione you scarlet you! You didn't tell me you were bringing home another man!" Hermione sent her boyfriend an unamused glare. Hagrid chuckled hollowly.

"Been alright," Hagrid choked, eyeing Ron up and down, voice just above a whisper . He took several strides into the room, eyeing the engorgiod couch with appreciation before sitting in it beside Ron.

"And how 'bout you Ron? You alright?"

"Your voice isn't gonna break me Hagrid. I'm sick not made of glass. And I'm doing a sight better than earlier so pretty good," Ron told him, patting the giants arm comfortingly. Hermione wanted to hug Ron. Hagrid was too gentle for his own good. She'd been afraid the man would start bawling when he saw Ron. Ron was trying to keep it as casual as possible.

"That's good," Hagrid said, voice thick. "You're, you're a good kid, better an... better than all the Gryffendor house together. Don't you forget it!"

"Woah there, let's be realistic," Ron said, nudging Hagrid hard. "I caused McGonagall just as many grey hairs as our Hermione here and that twit Harry in the kitchen..."

"Prat!" Harry's voice called out, amusement in his voice.

"Let's not start lying until I'm dead alright? It's not guaranteed yet, ya know? But after I'm gone, if yer gonna lie, make me a quidditch captain for the Cannons, yeah?"

"Idiot," Hermione muttered covering her face.

"It's not right, this ain't," Hagrid sputtered, blinking tears away. "You're too young. This is just... it isn't right!"

Ron shot her a dear in the headlights look, pleading with her to speak up, say something.

"He's not going anywhere. He won't die," Hermione said fiercely, moving forward. She put her hands on Hagrid's arm, pulling a dishtowel from the table to wipe at the large drops of water down his beard covered cheeks. "Our Ron's a fighter, isn't he?"

"Yer darn right," Hagrid said, nodding, he took the dishtowel in his hands and blew his nose. When Hagrid offered it back to her she just shook her head with a 'keep it' gesture of her hands.

Amidst the happy conversations and nostalgia Hermione found she didn't want to leave this room. It was perfect. So reminiscent of her life before the war, before it began in fourth year, that she just wanted to have it taken from her mind and locked away for her to keep forever in clarity. The sound of Harry's laughter, it felt like a lifetime had passed since it had resonated through her like this. Ron's animated speech, made more expressive with hands too large. Hagrid's presence, loud, low chuckles and eyes so kind and caring towards them. She felt utterly content.

And like a bubble, her safe, happy place of contentment popped.

A kangaroo Patronus came through the air. She saw the recognition on Ron's face. Felt the need to pull him back, away from it. She need not. It went straight to him.

"Traux," Ron muttered putting his glass of water down.

It opened its mouth and a harried, Australian accent came out.

"Antea's been taken. I need your help Ron."

## Part 4: Oldest Enemy

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

Authors Note: Well guys, this is it, the final leap. There are only five chapters left and I believe you'll all be taken by surprise by how everything ties together. And I mean everything. Anything you thought important and probably some things you didn't will come together in these last five chapters. I hope you all are as surprised by coming events as I found myself one night long ago as I did the outline. It all just clicked suddenly and I knew exactly how everything needed to be set up in order to get the greatest surprise. So without further ado, I present the final installment of Stay Standing. -Windy

Part 5: Oldest Enemy

**"If you don't like your destiny, don't accept it. Instead, have the courage to change it the way you want it to be... !" -Naruto**

The prophecy, the prophecy, the prophecy... it felt like a disease taking over her mind she thought about it so much. At the moment of her realization there were one hundred seventy three hours between it and the arrival of one Ron Weasley on the doorstep of the Burrow. It had hit hard and fast and unforgiving.

Most of all it had hit with a cord of merciless knowledge that knowing what it meant gave her not even the foggiest suggestion for how to fix it. Her frazzled mind put the pieces together with a fascinating level at the sheer lack of surprise. She'd found herself more surprised by her own stupidity, her own lack of clarity, than the actual unfolding of the truth.

*The child born at the height of the dark lords first reign of the rebellious pure bloods and who took the poisoning of the dark lords oldest enemy wilts under the hold of death. Death must be returned before life is dragged into the abyss!*

Somehow she'd considered every family but the Weasleys. Unthinkable! They were her family. How could a prophecy surround not one, but two of her best friends? It was preposterous. Ridiculous! Inconceivable! The coincidence was too great. The world could not possibly be so cruel as to condemn them to such rare phenomenons time and again.

It had to be some poor bastard out there who was suffering. Some person they were not aware of. Perhaps it had been one of their classmates, some young man out there who'd been taught at home because of his pure blood status and want to be taught by family instead of Hogwarts, there were thousands of witches and wizards their age. They didn't just consist of the 300 odd students attending one school out in the countryside. The possibilities were endless not narrowed down to just the families she knew.

Thousands of them! She'd researched and eliminated the bloodlines of thousands of English pure bloods involved in the war, even a few of other origins, who'd settled in England. How could it be the one family just inches from her at seemingly all times? How could it be hers!

The thought had never occurred to her. Death was poisoning the person! Yet no one was hurting or sick in *her* makeshift family. There was no need to interview the Weasley's because she knew everything about the Weasley's. Molly updated her periodically, weekly, sometimes hourly! The Weasleys were safe. It didn't matter that they were a pure blood family or that they were well known as being rebellious and defiant towards Voldemort during his reign because she could clearly tell that everyone was safe.

The person involved in the prophecy was clearly someone suffering from illness, perhaps mental illness, or even a curse. There would be evidence of such events. There would be a trail left behind by such a human being. The family would be worried or weary of her knowledge or dead perhaps from the war, but she would find it.

Instead the knowledge alluded her for months. No one fit the case. There was no child alive who was in danger of dying whose family was of pure blood origins and whom rebelled valiantly during the first war. Those things were already so rare! If she could not find a family to fit the description then how could she narrow down? There was nothing to narrow it down to!

Voldemort's oldest enemy. Someone had taken the poisoning of Voldemort's oldest enemy. That had sent alarm bells through her at its familiarity. She'd been dismissive though. Ron was fine. There was nothing wrong with him. He played quidditch and worked as an intern at a hospital and had a small part time job and was working at Auror training. He didn't even seem to have time to breath let alone be sick. Ron would tell her if something was wrong. She trusted him. He was her best friend and she would *know* if anything were wrong.

It didn't matter that Ron had drank a poisoned mead. And besides that fact it was Slughorn. Even if it the man had said he meant to give it to Dumbledore, an old enemy of Voldemorts, it didn't mean anything because the man had never had any intentions of giving it to him. Ron hadn't taken *the poisoning of the dark lords oldest enemy*.

The wording suggested oldest in a manner that suggested something other than simple age. Surely Voldemorts oldest enemy had been the muggleborn father who abandoned him or the witch who'd fallen in love with a muggleborn in the first place. Surely Voldemort had enemies before he became the dark lord and fought against Dumbledore.

And even if it was Dumbledore... Ron was fine. He'd joked in their last letter! He made her smile and tried to cheer her up and rattled on and on about all the thing going on in his life just as he normally did.

Then the arguments came and wasn't that just so Ron? To get under her nerves and be so abrupt and rude and surprise him with his sheer bullheadedness and dispassion?



So she'd ignored the tiny voice in the back of her head as the months passed because there was no way it was possible. It was someone else.

Being unable to find the person she'd tried to figure out what they would do when they did find them. Because it was all jolly good to show up at someone's doorstep, someone who was dying, and point to a prophecy while nodding their heads, but what good would it do if they couldn't stop it? If they couldn't *return death* before *life was dragged into the abyss*.

What did that even mean? Was it a metaphor? Was it an illness that would take them or something more literal? Was a creature like Death, the Grim, or whatever, coming to seek this person out? Did they mean a dementor or some other creature of death who would physically drag them into some sort of abyss? A pit, a cave, underneath a rock? Endless interpretations could be taken but it would be so much easier if they could just *find* the person.

She'd talked it over with Harry so many times they could both say the prophecy backwards, name it's synonyms off, it's anonyms, it's anagrams, they could probably say the whole be damned thing backwards while dancing about the room with teacups on their heads.

She'd even gone to George about it. He'd scratched his head, muttered to himself, squared his shoulders, then took the copy from her and walked into his shop. Three weeks later he'd been just as perturbed. It meant nothing to him either.

Then Ron walked through the door. Over whelemed she'd not thought to connect the dots. Her firm assurance of 'not Weasley' had stayed put while she'd soaked in and digested everything. In the path of the blizzard, being frozen from the outside inwards she'd not realized it, nor on Christmas morning. It took longer.

The connection between the prophecy and Ron Weasley poured itself through her veins in one horrifying leap of clarity upon arriving

to work. A small note on the counter of her desk, a sticky note with the names of interviewees yet to be, war vets and vics she would be probing for qualifications in the program. She'd been using the program to scan potential prophecy holders. Ron Weasley's medical folder, only yesterday held in confidentiality by Shacklebot, sat next to it.

Her cappuccino hit the floor, the paper cup folding, bending under a flood of hot liquid, forming the lid off and across her carpeted floor. Her stack of neatly organized and alphabetized folders followed to soak it all up.

She turned, stumbled, out into the array that surrounded her of paper cranes zipping from office to office with messages. She'd told Harry and Ron she'd be going into the office to arrange for her hours to be covered by someone capable in her absence. Now she walked passed the candidates waiting outside her doors without a glance.

She found a bathroom. Locked the door, silenced the room, and screamed. No wand was lifted, but the sinks exploded in a disarray of magic out of control. Water spouted out of broken pipes. She didn't even notice as her socks became soaked from a severe leak. She screamed and screamed and wailed.

Blood trickled from her nose before she exhausted herself into stopping. Her body folded. Knees clanked against the ground harshly. Her chest heaved. Her thoughts raced. Harry and Ron needed to be told. They needed to handle this now. They would meet up. Alone. After Ron's therapy tomorrow. She'd tell Harry first and they'd come up with a plan. They'd have a nice night with Hagrid and then they would deal with all of this.

When she finally became aware of her surroundings again she found herself giggling in hysterical laughter. It looked similar, far too similar, to the bathroom of first year. When the ogre had gotten into Hogwarts and smashed the room to bits. It looked just like her first moment of friendship. She glanced uselessly at the door expecting Harry and Ron to come rushing in, but no one did.

So she did what Ron and Harry taught her. She wiped the blood from her face. Stood up. Waved her wand to fix the mess. And walked out with her poker face. Ready to fuck with whatever was trying to fuck with her.

## Dear Gred Ch16

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter.

Chapter 16: Elementary, Dear Gred

"Do you see, Harry? Do you see the flaw in my brilliant plan now?

I had fallen into the trap I had foreseen,

that I had told myself I could avoid, that I must avoid."

-Dumbledore

*It was a widely kept secret among the Weasley family that the twins did, in fact, possess vastly different personas. They were both brilliant at pranks, both unfairly clever for their own good, and with a healthy dose of common sense thrown in for good measures. Everyone knew that.*

*What many failed to know was that George came up with much of the mechanics concerning how their inventions were created. He and Fred would bounce ideas off of one another and George would come up with the basic design for it. Fred, on the other hand, was a crafty son of a bitch and managed to get his hands on whatever material George needed. Fred handled the financial aspects. He was talented in placing bets, negotiating prices, getting in contact with just the right people.*

*On this fair day George was muttering to himself as he devised the mechanics to a fairly nasty hex while Fred looked over his shoulder in avid curiosity and growing interest. It was to his further dismay when he found himself the one to be yanked away from said brother just as that certain gleam entered George's eye.*

*The bloody genius had figured it out.*

*" This had better be good," Fred muttered to Ron.*

*Ron wasn't looking at him though. The prefect was looking for someplace for them to go, dragging him towards the apartment area of the joke shop.*

*" I need to ask you a favor," Ron announced.*

*A sinking feeling entered Fred's stomach.*

*Nothing good ever came of those words.*

*Fred was about to open his mouth to say something scathing, but his harried brother's pale, shaking form made him pause. So, instead, he did the mature thing, for once, and said instead.*

*" Yeah?"*

*A quick nod was his only answer.*

*Fred followed Ron all the way to the secret room, built with help by Charlie, and slipped in.*

*" Paranoid?"*

*Ron twitched in the light of his wand.*

*" If this gets back to Harry and Hermione, or worse, mum, I'm bloody dead," Ron muttered.*

*" And what's so world ending, eh?" Fred teased, though there was a serious undertone to his words.*

*" You told me once you had a few shady contacts in the Ministry, right?"*

*Fred tensed up.*

*" Yeah, a few."*

*" I need you to get them to find some information out for me."*

*" What's this about Ron?"*

*His little brother shifted uncomfortably. Refusing to look him in the eyes. Fred reached forward and shook him hard.*

*" What the hell have you gotten into, Ron? Why don't Harry and Hermione know about it?"*

*" I need to know whose brain it was that attacked me."*

*Fred took a step back.*

*" The ministry said that they couldn't release any information on the Department of Mysteries," Fred pointed out.*

*" Which is why I'm asking you and not Dad," Ron snapped.*

*" I don't think I can get into something like that, Ron."*

*Ron rubbed along the length of his arms. His stormy, blue eyes filled with anger and frustration. Without warning Ron turned and slammed his fist into the wall. Fred cringed at the audible crack. His younger brother seemed to not notice at all though. He was breathing hard through his nose, his tense muscles relaxing.*

*" Got that out of your system, yeah?" Fred asked, raising both eyebrows.*

*Ron shot him a glare before muttering the release spell for the room. He shook his hand, sucking on the quickly swelling knuckle.*

*" Give me your hand, stupid," Fred drawled. He drew out his wand and with a quick jerk snapped the bone back in place. Ron snarled, but said nothing else concerning it, rotating his wrist and grimacing.*

*" So, there a particular reason you're acting like an ass or is this just your normal dosage of moodiness Gin told me about?" Fred said*

*casually.*

*"Gin can go fuck herself," Ron snapped. "And so can you. I don't know why I even bothered coming here."*

*Ron moved to head out the door, but Fred snapped his fingers. The charms channeled to his and George's magic reacted instantly, locking Ron inside the shop. Ron tried a few different spells, muttering darkly to himself as each one failed.*

*"So, why do you want information on the tentacle brain thing, Ronniekins?"*

*Ron pointedly ignored him. Making his way for the back door.*

*"It locks at the same time the front door locks. Same for the windows!" Fred called out. His answer was more cursing and the sound of a jiggling doorknob.*

*"Are your scars bothering you again?" Fred called loudly. A few of his customers were starting to stare now, eyeing the locked door wearily, but he ignored them. Ron came through the entryway, glaring heatedly at him as he eyed the windows in what Fred suspected was consideration.*

*"You break it, you buy it," he warned.*

*"With what, exactly? You gonna take my three generation hand me down socks as compensation?" Ron challenged, an edge of bitterness to him.*

*"You have to graduate at some point, don't you?" Fred shot back. "George and I can wait."*

*If it was possible, Ron's voice grew more sarcastic.*

*"Like you?"*

*"Calculated decision."*

*" Random inclination."*

*" Financial backings. We knew we'd be fine."*

*" What have your sales looked like recently? Far as I can see, jokes won't be pertinent in a war."*

*" Enough Ron!" Fred finally snapped. "Bloody hell, get a grip! Stop being an arse!"*

*" Let me out then and I'll gladly clear your way of all assholes."*

*With a wave of disgust Fred released his hold on the door.*

*" When you grow up a little bit, then you can come talk to me about this brain thing," Fred snapped.*

*Ron just shook his head though.*

*" Not bloody likely, as long as my names Ron."*

*" What's that supposed to mean?"*

*Ron stilled in the doorway, hand on the frame. His face was downcast, no longer angry, just sort of... resigned.*

*" If it was Dad who asked. Or Ginny or Lee or Harry... I bet you'd have said; "I'll see what I can do." It's all I've ever see you guys say when something hard comes up."*

*" But not you?" Fred said softly. "Poor little Ronniekins is ignored?"*

*Ron jerked away from him, shooting him a venomous glare.*

*" You know," Ron said snidely, walking backwards, away from him, "You don't see it, but you and George? You're just like mum. Overprotective and courageous to all the people you care about most. To all the people who meet your requirements."*



*" And you don't meet those requirements?" Fred seethed.*

*" I don't meet anybody's requirements."*

*The door to the joke shop slammed shut.*

---

Percy Weasley shattered his mug against the closed door of his office. The pieces landed with a clatter, steam still spilling from what liquid sat in its curved remains. What a fucking mess. What a bloody fucking shit fest.

That's what this all was.

It was time for him to head home. Time to gather his things, drop them off at his lonely apartment, and then head over to dinner with his family. To his father that still had a hard time looking him in the eye. To his sister who refused to speak to him unless they were around others and she was forced to be decent with him. To a mother that seemed to half want to reach out to him and half afraid to. To his elder brothers' whose grim, thin lips matched more in agreement in concerns to *him* than he'd ever seen them be in agreement with anything. To one younger brother who was broken and the other who was *dying* .

Such a fucking disaster.

'One day at a time, Perce, one day at a time.'

His mantra for nearly three years now. When all the anger and resentment and stupidity had finally begun to fade into realization and horror and disillusionment those words had developed like drugs to an addict. He did everything to maintain them, everything to keep those words alive, knowing all the while he could very well just be crafting his own form of illusion in order to live. Because who could forgive what he'd done? Certainly not him.

His father had nearly died.

He'd ignored the letter.

Ginny and Ron had been hurt.

He ignored the letter.

Ron had nearly died. Should have died.

He ignored the letter.

Bill had been slashed by Greyback.

He did not even open the letter.

It wasn't so much a fear of how they would react. Though that thought too left him trembling. What caused him to pause, to shove each letter away with a hand over his mouth and eyes threatening to break open, they poured so heavily, was how could he, the coward, dare to step into their lives when the pivotal moment of horror had passed?

His father had almost died and he hadn't been there when the news first came. Hadn't held his mother when she most needed it. He hadn't been there to dash to his father's side, to possibly defend him should the act have been needed. He couldn't make up for not being there all that time so how dare he try to come when the danger was over? How could he walk in when blood had been shed and his family had been there? He was no fool, he knew that *he* would not be the first thought. Nor would he be the third or the fifth thought. Those letters came only as an afterthought, when everything had passed and there was nothing Percy could do.

He deserved that: to be an afterthought.

The letters represented a trail of failures not because he failed to answer them, but because he hadn't been involved up until that moment. And each time something occurred it was like the pillars were being stacked against him. "This is how much you cannot

return. This is how much they hate you." When the letters had stopped coming though... That had been the moment when the pillar tumbled down in a line of accusation that followed his every step, haunted his every waking moment.

Now...

Well now he had been there.

For Fred's death.

For the discovery of Ron's secret. Ron had departed the family under circumstances eerily close to his own heart. To his own mistakes. All of his attempts to warn Ron had been ignored with as much fever and anger and bitterness as his own words had echoed in past encounters. It had left him confused. He and Ron had never had anything in common with each other. His actions had bewildered him. *What the hell* was his brother thinking?

He'd driven himself mad trying to figure it out.

And then a gaunt face and haunted blue eyes had been shoved through the door and words like 'dying' and 'aggressive treatment' and 'there's a slim chance he'll survive' were being thrown around like a curse that none of them could defend themselves against.

It was like he was a fresh minted seventeen year old fresh out of Hogwarts who'd opened all the letters at once to see what his future was and been given the biggest 'Fuck You' the universe had to offer.

And then that thought slapped him in the face with another.

Ron was a freshly minted Hogwarts graduate. And he'd spent his first year after the war, after receiving his graduation honors, dying in a hospital room alone, away from everyone who loved him because he thought it would be *easier* for them.

He thought of his own first year. Trailing behind a Ministry official who'd been going crazy over the escape and fear of his convict Death Eater son. How Percy's only thoughts had been about getting a promotion at work, never knowing the disaster he was heading towards. Ron had been a fourth year then. Ginny third. The Twins sixth. All so young. So vulnerable.

His arms still remembered wrapping around a soaking wet, shivering Ron as he emerged from the lake. The fear and terror that waiting had brought him, even though he knew Dumbledore wouldn't let any of the children come to harm. Because he'd read the facts. Before the tournament began he'd dug up everything ever written about the Triwizard Tournament and immersed himself in every gruesome death and spectacular victory the written word had to offer. The casualties shrugged off for the sake of sport and competition.

After the failure of that horrible year. He'd dived into making his reputation better by listening to the advice of *his* betters. He talked to all sorts of members in the ministry. And they'd all said the same thing, the best thing to do was to keep his head low and to do what his elders told him. 'He was eighteen years old,' one gentleman told him softly, 'plenty of time to build up a career for himself. Especially with such a good head on his shoulders.'

Everyone he worked with knew he worked hard, that he was sensible, practical, and responsible. So, when after the debacle, he'd been offered a chance to make up and was promoted... well, he deserved it. He'd worked hard, listened to his elders.

And then the argument with his father happened.

Everything pointed to his father being a radical. An ignorant one at that. How could one man be right when the entire ministry, hundreds of older wizards with years of experience and dedication, said that he was wrong. His father was a nobody. Some man who worked in a department no one cared about, that had nothing to do with politics, who had no experience in dealing with crime or justice or the government. His father cleaned up muggle messes. That was all. Yet

the man claimed to *know* without a doubt that Voldemort was back because a child told him so.

A child.

Yet Percy was the one in the wrong because he listened to his common sense.

Foresight, in human form, was definitely a platinum blonde, bitch.

The door to his office creaked open. His boss, Henry Davis, walked through the door without warning, his foot hitting glass shards on his way in. Davis raised an eyebrow at him, gesturing vaguely across the floor with his own full mug.

Without bothering to reply Percy flicked his wrist, his wand glowing purple as his bag assembled all his work and notes for the day. He stood, the bag magically wrapping itself over his head, before heading out the office. Another flick and the stain was silently cleaned up. The mug depositing itself in the trash.

"Still an hour before quitting time," Davis noted, without inflection.

"That it is."

They exchanged no other words as Percy left the office before any other worker. Odd looks cast his way, but they, nor he, said a word.

It didn't take him long to get home. The apartment he'd chosen was not even three blocks from the Ministry. His old apartment. He'd detested it these last few years, but hadn't found a better place yet. Not with all the destruction. Percy wasn't sure how he had managed to escape unscathed. Not a scratch or burn mark had touched the apartment complex, though the one next to it was nothing but ashes. He suspected the building of having been enchanted many times over by overly cautious members of the Ministry. A bonus for Percy, but also a reminder of the overly privileged purebloods that allowed the war to start in the first place. That was all that seemed to live in

the apartment, which only made his hatred of the place three folds as strong as it would have been on its own.

Still... it was the only place he'd ever called his own. The only place that he'd gotten with his own income and his own hard work. The idea of moving back home had briefly occurred to him. But one step into his old room, abandoned so long ago, left him sick and shaky. He'd turned and fled the room, slipping it shut with such haste, it had slammed.

The door opened for him easily, but once inside Percy tensed. Something was different. His wand was out in, but the briefest of moments. His footsteps silent as he moved inside. A glow lit up his bedroom.

He paused outside the door, quickly sending out his patronus to Charlie. Gathering his courage he dove inside, wand raised, a curse on his lips... to find no one. Keeping the wand raised he moved closer to the light. It lay inside his desk drawer.

His insides began to squirm as he realized the only thing of value in there. His heart hammering in his chest, he dipped his hand inside and pulled it out. A small box. Percy put down his wand, sitting on his bed with an 'oomf,' and with shaking fingers he lifted the lid. Carefully, he brought the small object out of its holder.

One-sixth of Fred's wand, glowed with life.

---

The Ministry was in Chaos.

Ron slumped down, his blue hoodie pulled fully over his head, but it was hardly necessary. No one noticed them. Even with Hagrid's girth striding behind them, no one paid them a second glance.

Ron found himself taking bigger gulps of air than necessary, trying to still the rising panic as he followed Traux. The shorter young man leading them straight to the Auror's department.

Antea was *missing*.

Not, 'well, Antea's gone on one of her walkabouts with the herds.' No. Ripped from her herds in violence. Taken kicking and screaming, fighting tooth and nail, at least, Ron couldn't imagine her having gone any other way. Snatched right from the place she felt safest.

The dark skinned Irish woman appeared before his eyes. Jauntily saluting him with two fingers and informing him that she was more than willing to kick a little arse for him if he needed it. That was the last time he'd seen her. Nothing had seemed wrong. Nothing that implied she was in any danger at all. She'd been as merry go lucky as per norm.

Had she been running from something more than ghosts when she came to Australia?

"What's going on?" Harry demanded, keeping pace beside them. Hermione walked further behind, hand clenching something inside her pocket. Her pale features hidden behind her endless curls. If he hadn't known before, he knew now, she was up to something that he should be weary of.

"A group of Death Eater's struck a few hours ago. We think they were looking for information to plan an attack. Two clerks were left dead."

"Did they get it?" Harry asked.

"They took information from several different offices belonging to the heads of different divisions. Probably to throw us off of what they're planning. Information on Ministry security, the location of illegal dark cursed items, prisoner data, safe houses... multiple high security risks, but we can't possibly cover them all. They're going to strike and when they do we're going to have our forces spread out trying to anticipate it. They may not even strike the areas they grabbed information for. It might be a diversion," Traux hurriedly explained.

"Why do you need Ron?" Harry cut in.

"This is Antea we're talking about, Harry, Traux wouldn't have *not* called me in," Ron told him.

Traux shifted around guiltily, the look on his face clearly saying he wouldn't have. Ron sent his friend a reproachful glance, to which the interrogator cleared his throat and looked away, towards where all the chaos seemed to be centered around.

"It's bigger than that, mate, someone's calling you out," Traux explained.

Harry tensed, his eyes suddenly furious.

"They want Ron?!"

Ron raised his eyebrows at Harry.

"I'm really hoping that's righteous fury on my behalf rather than disbelief," Ron drawled, only half joking.

Harry shot him an incredulous glare, gesturing to Ron's body, looking back at Traux as they continued walking as if to demonstrate how ridiculous both of them were.

"You can barely walk, Ron! And they're taking you directly to the place where the enemy wants to kill you!"

"I'm not helpless, you know," Ron growled. "I can help with whatever they need."

"Like what?" Hermione snapped. "Spellwork? Or are you gonna beat them down with your bare, skin and bone fists?"

"Bloody hell, both of you?" Ron almost whined.

The way they kept on either side of him, stances angry and protective, said quite frankly 'yes.'



"I'm not taking him to where they want to kill him," Traux eased back into the conversation, "I think we can narrow down a location with his help."

"How's that?" Hermione asked.

"One of the Death Eaters left a message for Ron. Egging him to meet him somewhere in exchange for Antea."

The group quieted then. Walking in silence.

He'd dragged her into this mess.

It was *his* fault.

He'd dragged, kind hearted, tell it like it is Antea into the fucking war.

*' An agreeable lad ye are, and yeese looks a sight like me brother to boot. Well, he's a tad bit darker than yeh, but why mess with specifics, right? Since we're both new to this place... want to catch dinner together? I imagine it would be a tad less lonely for us both, ai?'*

*' Then what's the matter Mr. Sunshine?'*

*' Thank Merlin ye wear boxers, boyo. Practically comfy shorts they are. It would 'ave been right embarrassin' to go through a bunch o briefs!'*

They entered the central Auror department, men and women in the elite robes of order running around with angry, worried looks about them.

"What's the message?" Ron finally asked as Kingsley came into view.

"See for yourself," Traux stated grimly, pointing towards the far wall.

***Rendez-vous dans l'endroit ou la vie alesage de la mort, si vous souhaitez voir Mme Sissily un fois de plus Weasley.***

"Is that... French?" Hermione murmured in bewilderment.

Ron stared at the words before glancing at Hermione.

"You know what it says?"

Hermione shook her head.

"I stayed in France for only a little bit. I only know the basics."

Without a word Traux waved his wand in front of the message. Words appeared over them, like a mirror image, before slowly shifting, translating.

***Meet in the place where life bore from death***

***If you wish to see Miss. Sissily once more, Weasley.***

Harry turned to Ron, a question in his eyes, but Ron already knew where this was going. He held up his hands, shrugging his shoulders. Riddles were for Ravenclaws and even if there was a chance of Ron being a part of Hufflepuff or Slytherine, no one in their right mind would ever suggest Ron might go to Ravenclaw, even in gest.

"Where life bore from death?" Ron mumbled. "Not the faintest clue, sounds like some Tralawny shit to me."

"Do you at least know who might have done this?" Traux pressed.

Ron read the words again. French. A person who spoke in riddles... puns. He pressed his hand to his temple. The normal headache seemed intent on cracking his skull open. The medical potion that normally subdued the pulsing, grinding pain in his head seemed to have little affect today. He blamed it on the treatment he'd had this morning though. Who did he know that was French outside of

family? Though his mum might argue on rougher days, he was certain his sister in law didn't have any evil intents for them all.

He couldn't remember any death eaters who were French...

*' Le Bocca della verita.'*

A silky voice whispered. Ron felt himself falter where he stood. Felt nausea well up inside him. A man who read too much. Who quoted almost everything he spoke. Ron rubbed at his forehead, the headache spiking still further, like it was a metal rod trying to pry his brain from the pink matter. The mouth of truth. What was the mouth of truth? What the fuck did that mean? The meaning seemed to slip away from him as soon as he grasped it though. The voice falling away behind other things.

"You recognized something?" Kingelsy's voice boomed, his eyes were intent on Ron, narrowed, as they normally were when they were trying to figure him out.

Ron shook his head, feeling helpless.

"What about..." Harry spoke up, before his voice died off. Ron suddenly found eyes on him. Intense, brilliant green searching him for a long moment. "There's a prisoner... someone you might know."

Ron blinked at him in complete bewilderment.

"Me?"

"His name is Spinsor."

His head exploded. Ron cried out in pain, holding his head in his hands. His knees buckled. Ron felt arms around him. Heard voices, but everything was too loud. A man too large to be human stood in front of him. No, towered over him. He was on the ground, held down, why was he held down? There was something in the man's

arms. Large, sharp metal like clippers. When the man grinned, it was crooked, with teeth too large for his mouth. Spinsor.

Spinsor was the man who...

Like being struck by a hex between his eyes, his head exploded in agony. Ron screamed, digging his nails into his head to release the pain. The man stood before him, wand pointed almost leisurely at him, a crooked grin and eyes that stared in curiosity.

*" She's dead. Don't matter what 'appen's to her now."*

And then just like that. It was gone. No part troll stood before him. Just Harry. Ron reached out, gripping Harry's forearms to steady himself. Green eyes stared at him in terror. As if he thought Ron would fall through his body. Ron tried for a reassuring smile, it only seemed to send the slightly younger man into a deeper fit though. Something wet slid down his cheek, but he couldn't remember crying. Couldn't remember why he would cry either.

"Ron?"

Hermione.

He turned, warm brown eyes stared down at him, glistening too bright. He let one hand go of Harry to cup her cheek. How many times had they been in this position? How long before it was all *finally* over. Hermione's cheek felt infinitely warm against his frozen fingers, but she didn't flinch at his touch. Her hand came to cup his own, as if there was nothing in the world more natural. With great effort, and their help, he stood up.

"You okay, mate?"

Woozily, his eyes focused on the voice. On Traux. This confusion wasn't natural. Even at his lowest, he knew what was going on. Yet, here and now, it was like his mind refused to click together. Like the pieces were fuzzed out and the once easy puzzle pieces were now

water logged, exposed to too much damage to go back together the way it once was. And then it hit him. They were here because of Antea. They were here because they thought he knew something. Silence stretched on as he tried to collect himself. Spinsor.

Who the fuck was Spinsor? The place where life bore from death. How the ever loving fuck was he supposed to know what that means?

Harry shook his head. Ron followed suit. More out of habit than anything else. He felt like he was missing about sixteen pieces of the puzzle here and nobody was telling him they'd accidentally been kidnapped by the Nome's.

"Ron, I know you're not in top form, but I'm afraid we're going to need every bit of information you've got on these Death Eaters. You're the only one who knows anything about Wormtails last days. Anything might be useful."

Bewildered, Ron looked around the room at the expectant faces.

"I wasn't the only one," Ron stated, folding his arms. "Harry was with me when Wormtail was forced to kill himself. I don't know anything more than *he* does."

"We know about what they did to you," Hermione said, her voice so gentle, so careful. "Harry informed me just a few days ago. We know what happened while you were... gone. After you left the tent."

Ron let go of them with a puff of air. Taking a few steps back, but finding his back tapping against Harry. The half giant gently held him up, as if afraid he might fall again. Hagrid looked pale, his large hands tense, eyes questioning.

"What ya mean by that 'Mione?"

Ron couldn't help but echo the thought.

"Yeah, I'm pretty damn clueless myself. I've told you what happened. I got caught by Snatchers and when I got away I went to Bill's."

Harry's features grew harsh and Ron found himself leaning back, away from him.

"Don't lie." Harry hissed. "You know damn well what I'm talking about, Ron. The Death Eaters that captured you gave us memories with you in it."

Hagrid sucked in a sharp breath, then cleared his throat. Ron turned back to look at the half giant, surprised to find Hagrid staring at him, eyes distant, considering.

"There's something I 'ave to attend to. Bit urgent. I'll be back as soon as I can," the half giant's voice boomed. He was nervous. Hiding something. The big guy was never good at that.

Hermione shot a disbelieving look Hagrid's way, even Harry seemed perturbed.

"Now?" Hermione demanded.

"Ai, I wouldn't leave, ya know that Hermione, but like I said. It's urgent."

Hagrid turned his back, heading out in a hurry, leaving silence in his wake until Kingsley broke it.

Ron blinked hard, shaking his head slowly. Looking around he saw Kingsley too was staring at him with grave disbelief. Hermione took his hand and squeezed it hard, willing him to tell the truth. But there was no truth to tell. There was nothing he could give them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ron growled, throwing his hands up in the air. "I've never been... I didn't see any Death Eaters when I left. Just some too bit Snatchers. Like I said."

Harry's eyes bore into him, eyes narrowed into slits, and mouth thin.

He couldn't believe this. Nobody believed him. He rattled his brain. Trying to place the name. Spinsor. Spinsor. Spinsor. It was oddly... not familiar. He wouldn't say that. More like... a dream he'd had a long time ago. But everyone else remembered it and not him. He rubbed his forehead, looking at each person in turn.

He squinted his eyes, concentrating on each of the duels he entered while in the war. All the fights he'd scraped by in. All the twisted masks and the distant voices.

Nope.

Nothing.

"I got nothing."

Kingsley's eyes showed disappointment. It stung. He thought Kingsley trusted him.

"Son, we really need the information. We wouldn't push you if it wasn't important."

"I'm telling you," Ron said slowly, "That I have no idea who you're talking about or who you're talking about."

Kingsley's eyes were grave as he turned to Harry.

"Should we... take him to Spinsor?" Harry asked, he was so uncertain. Ron looked between the two men, a little frightened by the haunted look that had entered Harry's eyes.

"I will fetch the memories," Kingsley answered after a moment. "It is possible it was too much for him, or his memories could have been wiped altogether, but if the latter is the case..." Kingsley shook his head in bewilderment.

"The Death Eaters clearly didn't do it Our interrogation of Spinsor reveals that much. The question then remains: Who did?"

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The moment Charlie burst through his fireplace, Percy sent him to get his dragon gloves. His older brother had stumbled back out in bewilderment, but he could hardly be bothered with that. He sent a patronus to George, Bill and Ginny, asking them to search for their pieces of Fred's wand.

Percy frantically gathered a few of his books on wand theory, waiting impatiently for Charlie to walk back into the house, only to shove him back into the fireplace.

"Mum's house. We're meeting the others there."

Charlie growled something unintelligible under his breath, but Percy hardly noticed. His brother was barely intelligible when he spoke out loud. When the older man was through Percy stepped through himself.

What he saw made his heart skip a beat. Well, several beats, if he were honest.

Ginny stood, freaked out, as the wand piece on the end of her necklace glowed bright. There was hope in her eyes, brown doe like orbs staring at it in wonder. Bill stood, rigid, like he expected the earring to stop glowing, to die on him at any moment. Charlie just looked bewildered, unsure of what to make of the glowing, transfigured piece of glove in his hands. And George... George was paler than he'd seen him in months. He looked at the part of his wand, glowing, as if it were a snake. He suddenly looked ten years younger, ready to fall apart, to sob, if anyone said the wrong thing. Too bad Percy didn't know what those things were; wrong or right.

"Does anyone know where Ron's piece is?" Percy asked.

"He brought it with him to Harry and Hermione's," Ginny said immediately.



"Are you sure?" Bill interrupted. "He was disorientated when they took him. Doesn't he keep it under his pillow? Would they have known to look?"

Percy opened up his mouth to answer, though with what he wasn't sure, when George sprung into action. He took the stairs leaps at a time. Ginny took off after him, Charlie quick on her heels. He and Bill followed suite.

Not since they'd heard Ginny fall down the stairs, when they were small, had he cursed just how far Ron's room was. He was the last to arrive, lungs heaving as he entered the room. He felt his heart shrivel up, implode, before inflating once more. There was a glow coming from beneath the pillow. George threw the pillow aside. Hands shaking as he lifted the deluminator up for them all to see.

Something tugged in his hand.

Percy looked down to see it. His part of Fred's wand breaking into pieces, into particles of light. He couldn't breathe. He felt his insides heave for air, but nothing came. Bill quickly tugged his earring off as it began to disintegrate. He watched as Ginny pulled her necklace off, with a small spell, breaking the glass.

They were all coming apart. All six pieces. All attracted to the deluminator. As the last parts of Charlies transfigured glove and George's transfigured wand accumulated towards Ron's transfigured deluminator, light began to explode from the pieces. They circled around one another, all six pieces, before slamming into the tip of the deluminator.

The Weasley house went dark.

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Hermione held the vial tight to her chest. Why did *everything* always have to happen at the worst possible time? By tonight Ron would have been rid of the thing killing him. He would still be still, still need to spend the better part of a year getting rid of the residue of the

infection, but it would not have progressed. He would not be standing there, under the threat of *it* lurching forward and taking him at any moment. He wouldn't be under threat of having the illness suddenly worsen, spreading with vengeance until there was nothing left.

Yet here they were. Never had she resented saving someone. Tonight though... Hermione shook herself. Hard. No, this was Ron's friend. They had to... but this was Ron. Ron who could *die* at any second. So could Antea. Ron, at least, had the advantage of having survived for the past few years with it in his body, the infection scouring through him like a wild animal bent on tearing him up from the inside out.

If she closed her eyes, she could still remember that last day in the tent. Her mind cleared of all traces of *it* now. She didn't know if the same was true for Harry, but for her... it seemed the longer she went without the locket around her neck, the more the small details of it all came back to her.

Sure, Ron had been wearing the locket that day, but she remembered how it had bogged down her mind to have it close to her. How difficult it was to concentrate on research with it near, and when she wore it? Impossible. It was like it knew what she was up to. Knew she sought its destruction. She'd felt it nudging her in other directions, she spent half her time doubling back to see if it had caused her to miss anything, going through everything with not just a fine toothed comb, but three.

It had been the smell that had woken her up that morning. A sharp pungent odor. She'd turned, the cold from outside pressing into her side, to see Ron walking through the flap of the tent. His big hand wiping at his mouth. He stopped when he saw her, hurriedly shoving his hands into his pockets. Her eyes had landed on the locket, cringing away from it, she turned her back to it. To him, accidentally, but back then it had been to it.

So many little nudges.

When Ron had gotten back her anger had been more than just his leaving. He'd escaped the damn thing. He *escaped*. While she and Harry had to spend more time with it on a personal level for near five weeks, trading it off, switching between them. It was a sick game. When they had it on they were foul. When they had it off they were recovering, waking up, sort of, but not, because it was still near, still had its hold on them.

Now she knows.

She knows it nudged Harry into rashness, into going to Godric's Hallow. She knows the betrayal both of them felt had been ten folds more detrimental because of *it*. She realized, with hysterical horror, how simple it all really was. Ron wanted to get away from it for a little bit. By god, they'd spent a year, alone in a tent together. It wasn't the end of the world to want to get away from that for a bit. In all honesty... if that damn thing hadn't been hanging around their necks they might have seen the rationality of it. They would have planned to meet up somewhere in a bit. Would have separated to look for clues and then come together to figure out what the individual had discovered. Hadn't they done just that when they were scoping out the Ministry? When they went to Mr. Lovegood's home? And afterwards, when they were at Bill's place and planning... the same thing. But the entire time in the tent had been with the locket around their necks.

But that *thing*.

That *thing* had made them feel trapped. Made them feel that if they were to leave they would die. It made them feel as if there was no other alternatives. No other choices. What would have been wrong about checking on the others? Absolutely nothing. They had their means. They didn't have to come face to face with them just to check on them. But they'd all felt a need to stay where they were until they figured out how to destroy it. And that's what they did. For *months*. And not one of them realized they'd been had. That the Hocrux was working its magic on them to keep them at bay, to keep them from doing anything productive.

Really, twiddling their thumbs inside a thirty some odd foot tent, reading the same research material over and over again... daft. If she'd had her head on straight... There was nothing she could do about it now.

The memories kept slipping in though. In her dreams. As she worked in her office. Little, terrible things she'd said to Harry and Ron, done to Harry and Ron. Why hadn't it clicked? The smell, the odor, so clearly bile. Ron had vomited outside the tent and been caught... by her! And it hadn't clicked in her head at all. The locket had scared her off. She'd been so off put by its presence that she hadn't even noticed the obvious. What was right in front of her.

Subconsciously she reached out. Her fingers intertwining with Ron's as they moved through the ministry. His long fingers cold against her warmth. When she'd first touched his hands after being reunited with him, she'd flinched. Her hands had jerked away. But with everything that was her and Ron, she immediately grabbed for it again, holding on tighter than ever. Because that was how they were. They rolled with the bad, hoped for the good to last, and held on to each other through the terrible.

Ron's fingers broke the hold, his arm sneaking around her waist to drag her closer as they walked. His right, damaged hand, sought out her own torture scar, as it always did. Large palm covering the memorized spot, *mudblood*, as if him holding it long enough might erase the letters from her skin.

"Be honest," Ron's deep voice murmured, the tone pleading. "Is there a chance she's alive?"

It was on the tip of her tongue to say 'of course,' but those type of words were for Harry. No matter how dark it seemed, there needed to be a ray of light. Harry needed them to be that for him. Ron didn't need light. He needed reality. He needed to know the odds in order to brace himself. He would go in no matter what those odds were, and he'd feel comfortable doing it, as long as he knew them.

She knew what *she* would want to hear. The logical side of things. Calculations to prove the odds against them. To see just where they needed to change things in order to improve those odds. Ron didn't need data though. He trusted her implicitly. He didn't need proof that the odds were what they were, just that they came from her mouth. So, she let her hand wander to up his damaged arm, putting the slightest of pressure on it to show reassurance, but not enough to hurt the appendix.

"Slim to none. In all likelihood, he's already killed her," Hermione whispered.

Ron didn't falter in his step. A flicker of shadow drifted into view of his icy blue eyes, but his features remained steadfast as he nodded once, a jerk of a movement that almost sent her off balance.

"Alright."

Ron lagged behind the others as they made their way through panicking secretaries, glaring Aurors, and newly risen political figures trying to gain control over the situation. Traux let his steps fall in line with his, eyes scanning the crowd with apprehension.

"I haven't been back home in while," Traux breathed. "Was there anything, odd, about her? Did she seem as if someone might have been following her?"

"No," Ron shook his head, "Besides that. These guys don't operate that way. If they'd been in Australia the same time as I was? They'd have gone after me then. Why use Antea as bait if I was in the hospital? You couldn't get a better advantage over me than no guards and enough potions that I'm out of it most of the time. Why wait until I'm home with some of the most powerful wizards and witches in Britain surrounding me? Whoever did this, they were one step behind me."

"Tracked you all the way around the world only to realize they'd missed you? They're going to be pissed, mate."

There was a drawn pale look to Traux, and Ron was sure if he wasn't already that way all the time, he'd be the same. It hadn't really struck him until then. Someone had hunted *him* down. Ron Weasley. Not Harry Potter.

At best he was bait. But why use Antea to get to him to get to Harry? Seemed six ways to Merlin's dirty balls redundant. And to go all the way to Australia to do it? Whoever did this was desperate.

Kingsley's baritone voice came back to him.

*" It is possible it was too much for him, or his memories could have been wiped altogether."*

When the bloody hell could that have happened? Spinsor. Merlin, his head ached. Why did that name hurt so much to think about? The light burn at his eyes, as if it were shooting directly into his brain. He stumbled.

*His body jerked. Red slid beneath his feet. A man stared at him from the corner of the room, his hands up in front of his body as if he were terrified of Ron. Satisfaction curled inside of him. He reached out his arm, red and black along its length, fingertips missing. This man was going to die for what he'd done. Ron was going to kill him. Kill the son of a bitch until not a scrap of him was left. He was going to kill Spinsor. The shadow lashed out.*

Ron caught himself. His hand shot up to his mouth, but it was too late. He vomited. That wasn't *him* . That wasn't him. He didn't remember that. He didn't do that. Ron flinched as arms wrapped around his shoulders. As quickly as he grasped onto the memory, it disappeared. Why had he gotten sick? For once he didn't feel nauseous.

"... home."

He blinked hard, looking up to see Harry talking hurriedly with Kingsley. He looked around. The ministry. Antea. He was going to

lose Antea. Just like he'd lost Rose. It was happening all over again. Curly hair brushed against his face. He turned into it, seeing big brown eyes staring at him; adoration, concern, fright.

Ron snaked his arm around her waist, using her slighter frame to push himself up. Hermione stood with him, hands like iron around his noodle like arms. The mess had been cleaned, he didn't remember that.

"I need to be here, Harry, somethings wrong. You know it same as me," Ron broke his friends argument up. "I... I really don't remember. I can feel it. I just can't... touch it."

Hermione's sharp voice cut through the tense air.

"Harry James Potter, exactly how many times have you been able to stop us from doing what was necessary?"

Harry's eyes turned grim, even as his mouth twisted into a knowing smile.

"Never. Not once."

Ron leaned down, kissing the top of Hermione's head. She kept her eyes set forward. Breaking her own heart even as she made his swell. She understood. Just as she'd understood back then in the tent that the quest was more important than her relationship. She understood Ron's loyalty to his friends. His refusal to go home when there was something he could do.

"I can't let Antea die, Harry," Ron told his best friend, firm, steady. "Haven't we already lost enough?"

Harry relented, backing down with a nod. But his eyes said more. Bright green eyes lecturing both of them, words searing between the three of them without the need to be spoken: We do this, but Ron, if you need us to back out. We are backing out. I won't lose you. You are more important than this stranger.

Traux wavered in the background. Unsure of his place in this close knit group. They entered a room with the largest pensive Ron had ever seen. It was evidently designed for a group. Ron had a hard time consolidating Dumbledore's personal pensive with this massive dish of swirling liquid. Tubes of memories lined the walls. An assortment of colors; blues, purples, grays, yellows, and a stunning amount of black.

"What are the black ones?" Hermione asked.

The question was automatic. Second nature. Hermione hardly seemed to notice she'd spoken it out loud. Ron couldn't fight a soft chuckle, though it died on his lips at Kingsley's grim expression.

"These are all memories. The black ones represent those that contain horrific crimes; murder, rape... torture."

He shivered as he felt Kingsley's eyes fall on him. Suddenly, he wasn't so keen to find out what they were talking about. He steadied himself though. Reminding himself this was for Antea. He couldn't let her down. Not like he'd let down Rose.

Kingsley pulled out two vials. One of them was blue with specks of red in them. The other vial was yellow with specks of black.

"Blue represents joy. Red represents pleasure. Spinsor considers his torture of you, Ron, to be a pleasant memory." Hermione shifted closer to him as Kingsley explained. Harry's hand found itself on Ron's shoulder, the fingers tense. "Yellow is for terror."

And they, of course, already knew what black meant.

"I forgot about the second memory," Harry whispered, his face had turned green.

"So, this Spinsor guy... remembers me?" Ron asked.



"He cut your fingernails off," Harry said, his voice pained and enraged. "With gardening tools."

"No," Ron shook his head, "they were splinched..."

He tried to focus on the memory, but it suddenly seemed fuzzy to him. In fact... he couldn't remember how he got to Bill's house at all. Surely he... Ron pressed his fingers to his head, alarm passing through him from spine to fingertips. Bloody digits flashed into his mind. A filthy, cold floor. Warmth bundled up against him. What the *hell* ?

A pile of bodies... burning. Limbs reaching out towards him.

And then the image was gone, leaving Ron dazed as he tried to collect his thoughts.

Ron let out a frustrated breath of air.

"Why is this happening?" Ron muttered. "The war is over! Why do people still keep dying?"

Traux blinked at him, staring from person to person.

"Who else has died since the war ended?" Traux asked, his concern deep and sincere.

"Are you fucking with me?" Ron growled. His hand gestured outwards to indicate the entire mess with Antea. "First Rose and now Antea? If we can't get there in time, who knows what that bastard will do!"

Traux nodded slowly.

"Don't count Antea out yet, Ron. We'll save her," Traux assured him, the shorter male patted his shoulder in assurance. "And this Rose person? I'm sure you did everything in your power to save her, Ron."

*What?*

Ron felt his mouth flap open. He tried to catch the words streaming through his head. Tried to make them come out in coherent sentences, but he missed. He could feel Hermione staring at Traux in surprise and confusion. Could see the look on Harry's face; as if he'd taken a step in the wrong direction and couldn't figure out what possessed him to go there.

"Are you mental?" Ron walked towards Traux, searching his friend's face. "Rose. Mary's daughter. Rose."

A sick feeling forced its way up at the blank look on Traux face.

"The patient at the hospital who died," Hermione spoke for him, the letters he'd sent to Harry and Hermione present at the front of her mind. "Rose."

"Sorry," Traux said, his eyes wandering between the three of them, before they landed on Ron's. "I don't know a Rose."

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The darkness exploded into light.

George's heart punctured by a thousand needles. Each one an individual stab into the tiny, pumping organ. Tiny because it had shriveled up to one-third its size when he'd lost the person who made him whole. The person he'd known full well was his counterpart. Had wondered how they'd deal with marriage. Living in two separate homes with two separate families, but had shrugged it off as an unpleasant step in the future they'd come to when they... well came to it.

The light was strong, but fading, thrusting familiar features into focus. The deluminator dropped to the ground with a clink. The figure tutted picking it up with fingers see through and glowing. George's teeth clicked together, seeming to not fit anymore. His tongue felt huge in his mouth, uncooperative.

He never thought it would work.

HE designed the spell and he'd never thought it would ever work!

His chest constricted, his lungs were failing. He couldn't breathe. This was actually happening. *He* was actually there! He reached out his fingers, the tips going through the figure.

Devastation.

Heart break.

He shook himself. No! Fool! Stupid Fool! He didn't have the power to raise the dead! Bloody stupid fool!

"Fred?"

The voice wasn't his though. It stuttered out in hope and fear and love, stumbling over each emotion as the single name fell onto the floor as if regurgitated, to sit in the middle of them. All five of them.

Fred, outlined in light, hand holding on to the deluminator, smiled sadly.

"Yes, and no, Percy" Fred said softly.

Percy stepped forward, like George, trying to grab a hold of him, but incapable of it.

"Don't tell me you're a ghost, Fred, please don't tell me you chose that," Bill pleaded with him.

Fred shook his head, eyes landing on George.

And then, in that moment, George found his voice. Found his bravery and courage and confidence. More confidence than he'd ever felt before.

"It's sort of like an afterimage," George started. "We..." and Merlin, did that feel good, feel natural and true after so long. So he said it again. "We took a tiny piece of our magical core into our wands. I

designed a spell, a damn powerful one, that could invoke an afterimage. Sort of like, a piece of Fred that could perform a task after his death. We both did it. We expected... well, we thought if we were going to die, it would probably be the both of us. We wanted a way to protect you all. It was incomplete of course..."

They were all staring at him blankly.

Fred chuckled.

"But you completed it, right?" Fred asserted. Full confidence in him. George smiled, warm tears running down his face as he nodded.

"Of course!" George said, he tried for hotty, but it didn't quite make it.

Fred understood though. He'd always understood.

"I figured it needed a little help and I found the perfect source."

Fred knocked back his shoulders, plastered on a big grin. He got the hint. George wiped at his eyes and stood straighter. He'd kept his eyes downcast until then, but now he could see his siblings faces. Ginny had her mouth covered, the tears flowing, but no sound coming out through her clamped fingers. Bill was grey faced, his hands loose at his sides as he looked from George to Fred and back again. Percy looked about ready to faint. And Charlie. There was blood dripping onto the floor from nails digging into his calloused palm. Percy moved forward, gently untugging the fist, gripping his own hand in his older brothers, as if they were five years old again.

George nodded to Fred, understanding. Because just like Fred got him. He got Fred.

"The power of seven," George announced. "The lot of us. Seven pureblooded children. Fred's piece of magical core in the wand, handed out to each of us, with a small charm that slowly draws magic into itself. I made sure to tell you to keep it close. This way if any of you were in any danger, the spell would activate. The longer it

draws on your magic, the more protection it can give. At this point the spell has a year of magic in it. Pretty potent."

"Still, I didn't think it would be needed this soon after the war," Fred stated softly.

It was then that George realized something.

"Ron!" George shrieked. He turned wide eyes to Fred. In his haste and need to see Fred again, he completely forgot the purpose of the spell in the first place.

"Why are you here?! The spell was designed for you to seek out the person in trouble! Why didn't it work?"

"I can't find him," Fred said calmly. "There's something in his magic, something stopping me from seeking him out."

George felt his insides cool. This was Fred's magic. Used in a form meant to protect. A form made up of Fred's basic traits. His will. But this wasn't really Fred. This was Fred's intentions. He remembered what he'd told Fred that day when they'd finally gone through with the spell.

*' We both have tempers. When we do this, we need to make sure that we focus only our calm and rational thoughts into the spell. We won't be able to help anybody if we're just a bundle of temper and rage. This spell is meant to be effective, protective, and loving.'*

Fred's words seemed to shake the others out of their trances as well. To remind this that Fred was actually dead. That this was not their brother. Just a memory. Just a simple magical imprint.

Fred's eyes wandered around the room slowly. Finally landing on the spot between George and Ginny. Bright, illuminated eyes met George.

"It's his illness, isn't it? From the scars?"

George gapped.

"You knew?!" Ginny shrieked, her outrage echoed by the others, their pain keeping them from speaking. "You knew Ron was sick and you didn't tell us?"

Fred ignored her though, still calm as ever as he turned to George.

"Do you remember, a little before the battle of Hogwarts when we needed supplies for some wounded families up in Manchester?"

George nodded mutely.

"The Ministry was hoarding potions near the department of mysteries. There were so many Death Eaters out searching for Harry that there was almost no guards about. We had a few people on the inside who snuck us in, but we got separated. Ron asked me a favor a while ago. He wanted to know whose brain it was in the department of mysteries. I told him it couldn't be done. But when I passed it... I couldn't give up the opportunity. I couldn't."

"What did you find?" Bill demanded.

"Those fucking bastards," Fred hissed. George knew then, from the anger wafting off, that this wasn't just an imprint. This piece. This single piece of the core... it was a recording. Fred always intended to leave this message for him should he die. Fred must not have had time. Which wasn't surprising. They'd been in Manchester when they got the call that the battle was happening *that* night. They'd performed the spells on each of their wands, slapped each other on the backs, and left for Aberforth's.

"Those fucking bastards knew Ron would die. They had the instructions on how to extract the thoughts from the get go. Knew what would happen if they were left to rot in his arms. And they let it happen!"

The imprint's eyes darkened, despite being made of light.

"Whose thoughts are there? Who is it?" Ginny whispered, she looked sickened, from the rolling, queasy feeling of his own stomach, he knew he felt the same.

"It was an ancient dark wizard," Fred told them. "Herpo the Foul. Inventor of the Hocrux."

The last word caused them all to flinch.

"Is the brain tentacle thing his Hocrux then?" Charlie asked, voice tight.

Fred shook his head.

"No, it is the leftover soul from Herpo's body. The Hocrux was destroyed and his brain was forcibly contained in the creature. Herpo had a change of heart towards the end, where he chose to destroy all evidence of his immortality. Even had the intentions of destroying his own Hocrux. But it was too late. The unspeakables got their first. They wanted to preserve the secrets of immortality inside Herpo's head. That's how the book inside Hogwarts was created, the book that Voldemort eventually found."

Fred turned to George.

"I know the incantation to remove the thoughts. It won't get rid of what's already been done. But I can stop the poisoning. I can take away the infection itself."

"But!" Ginny stopped, staring at Fred in confusion. "This isn't right. It can't just be a simple incantation."

Bill snorted.

"There are billions of incantations out there, Gin, finding the correct one is like trying to search out a cure for a curse created during the Old Kingdom. A lot of dark magic spells were invented in the old days, but they never bothered to create a cure. Without knowing the

original source, it's nearly impossible to find the cure. And I hardly think that finding Ron's cure was simple," Bill explained.

"You don't understand," Ginny snapped. "Hermione already found the cure. It's not an incantation, but a potion. Trelawney's prophecy stated that Ron took the poison of Voldemort's oldest enemy. Dumbledore! The oak matured mead reacted badly with the infection that was already there. Think about it. Ron had the love potion in his system, the cure for the love potion, the Bezoar, and the infection all rolled into one horrible ball of bad combination."

Ginny took a step forward, her hope almost contagious.

"Since the poison started everything going south, Hermione took a look at the medical charts and the research Ron's team has done. The bezoar broke into pieces, but there still there, still with the poison inside the bezoar! In his body. And get this, their gathered at the worst sites. Harry and Hermione pulled like a million strings, but they finally found information on how to get rid of them. The potion will break them down into small enough particles that Hermione would be able to pull them out through his pores. Removing the poison Ron took in place of Voldemort's oldest enemy."

"Except Dumbledore isn't Voldemort's oldest enemy," Fred stated.

"And getting rid of the Bezoar is the last thing you ever want to do to someone suffering an infection," Bill growled. "A bezoar doesn't just absorb poison. It absorbs dark magic. The Bezoar is helping Ron!"

"But not if the dark magic is reacting to the poison inside the bezoar," Ginny argued.

"Wait!" George snapped, eyes staring down Fred. "Wait a minute. What do you mean Dumbledore isn't Voldemort's oldest enemy?"

"Think about it," Fred said simply. "Who is the person who defied Voldemort first? Who destroyed their research in order to stop people from discovering immortality? Voldemort searched years and



years for the answer. He was thwarted time and time again because of whose efforts?"

"Herpo's," Percy breathed. "The scars. The scars themselves are the poisoning of Voldemort's oldest enemy. Hermione's got it all wrong."

Percy's head shot up, eyes wide.

George realized it at the same time.

"If Hermione gives Ron that potion. Ron will die."

"George," Fred's voice was calm again, his image stabilizing along with the spell itself.

The imprint had taken over the recording once more, no final messages, just a shield of love created to protect their family should they die.

George looked the last remnant of his twin in the eye as Fred's gaze bore into him.

"Find Ron."

# Determination Ch17

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

A/N: I solemnly swear never to write a forced amnesia plot line ever again under threat of painful headaches and overly complicated plots. It will be my duty as an author to stick to the simple truth and to assert those truths in lovely none heart attack inducing chronological order. Should I ever consider putting forced amnesia in another outline ever again, I will ask myself: Why? Why must you torture your mind with such terror? Have you learned nothing!? That is all I have to say about writing these last few chapters.

## Chapter 17: Determination

"When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with gentle and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement. Who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing, and face with us the reality of our powerlessness. That is a friend who cares." -Henri Nouwen

*Lavender brown wasn't the smartest person out there. Academics not being her forte and sports being another sore spot. There was one thing she excelled at though. She was a people person. She understood how people worked like Hermione Granger understood spell work. More than that though, she was self-aware. She knew when she was being annoying, when she was being a bitch, when she went too far. Hermione Granger could use a little more of that, as far as she was concerned.*

*Take fifth year. Ron trailed after the girl like a lost puppy. There'd been several times in the year that Ron had come up to Lavender to*

*tell her or Parvati received a message from Ron about Hermione.*

*" Hey, Lav, Hermione said she'd help with the Transfiguration homework you didn't get. Library at five okay with you?"*

*" Hermione says she needs her cloak, can you grab it for me from your dorm room?"*

*" Hey, so, Hermione's birthday is coming up and I was wondering if there was anything she's been muttering about that she might want. Anything she wants that she thinks we should know that she wants but she's not willing to say?"*

*She wasn't the smartest, but even she could feel the cold tide that seemed to suddenly and brutally take over Hermione in sixth year. Ron and Hermione had been inseparable in fifth and then suddenly, without rhyme or reason it seemed, Hermione just... stopped. Ron was halted at every advance, glared at as if he were a child for speaking. As Hermione's dorm mate, she'd had a front row seat to the whole thing. Parvati as well.*

*Ron had withered under it.*

*It had been sad. And yeah, she got it, Harry lost some relative or what not he'd been close to. The guy had suffered some major damage in the last few years and stuff, but come on. You don't just start... ignoring your best friend in favor of another.*

*The more she noticed Hermione's odd behavior toward Ron, the more she stopped by to give Ron some pick me up words. And the best pick me ups for teenage boys? A little flirting here and there, a few compliments. It seemed to help him. He went from looking like a kicked dog to shy smiles, anyways. She'd ranted at Parvati for hours about it. Lavender was a lot of things, but disloyalty was by far one of her biggest pet peeves. It had all come to a boiling point one night when she'd annoyed Parvati a little too much.*

*" So why don't you do something about it?" Parvati snapped.*

*" Like what? Talk to Hermione about it?"*

*Parvati rolled her eyes.*

*" Nothing useless like that. She'd rather swallow Trevor than talk boys with us."*

*Lavender sat on the bed.*

*" Like what then?"*

*" You're very good at being annoying."*

*" Oh, thanks for the relevant update, really boosts my confidence."*

*" Why don't you kiss him?" Parvati persisted. "If there's one thing we've learned in all this time with them as classmates it's that Hermione and Ron have a very large jealousy bit when it comes to each other and Potter. They don't like anyone trying to get into their little triangle."*

*Lavender shivered.*

*" I'm not sure if I'd want to get in between that."*

*" Play dumb. Be annoying. Be, like, the worst clinging girl ever. Be whiny. It will drive Hermione crazy with jealousy and Ron won't know what to do. You know how he is, he can't say how he feels if his life depended on it, and if you're annoying enough? He'll just avoid you like the plague rather than hurt your feelings. Ron's never purposefully an ass, the guy is just hopeless when it comes to explaining himself. That way you won't actually have to spend a lot of time with him and Hermione will get her head out of her ass."*

*She wasn't sure at first, but the more she thought about it, the more fun it all seemed. Ideas formed in her mind as she thought it all out. Wouldn't that make the year so much more fun? She'd dated a few guys, some her year, some older, but she was a bit bored, to be honest. It would be a challenge too, wouldn't it? Hermione was the*

*most stubborn person she knew. She'd probably be boiling mad and do her little hissy fit for a while before she finally relented and did something about it.*

*" Hey Parvati? Do you still have that ghastly necklace from your grandmother?"*

*Parvati hummed, staring at her with the beginnings of something Lavender might call impressed.*

*" It's at home, but I can get it here in a week or so, you want to wait until then?"*

*" Oh no, I'm sure Ron will still be bumbling around trying to figure out if I'm crazy or not and Hermione will still be spitting fire. I think it would be a very nice touch though, don't you think? Cherry on top and all that jazz."*

*" I was thinking like a one or two time thing when I suggested it," Parvati noted.*

*" This is entertainment gold, madam, pure live production, I'm going to drag it out as long as possible."*

*" Hermione's going to hate you," Parvati chuckled.*

*" Only the me that she's allowed herself to know. If she wasn't so awful at socializing she'd be able to recognize a coax when it sat in front of her."*

*" Watch out for Harry. He's not going to be happy with you either," Parvati warned.*

*" Boo hoo for them. Maybe if they hadn't neglected their boy for so long, they wouldn't have to worry about all these problems."*

*" Let's just hope they don't combine forces on you."*

*Lavender actually felt a chill go up her spine.*

*" No worries there, I'm going to be playing the damsel in distress from Act 1 to the final scene."*

*" That's my girl."*

---

"What do you mean..." Ron trailed off, looking straight into Traux's eyes. "You knew her. You've talked to her. Both her and her mother!"

"I've never met a Rose and definitely not her mother," Traux told him, eyeing Ron wearily.

"This isn't some game," Ron hissed. "This isn't some interrogation room and it's sure as hell not some joke!" His chest heaved hard. There were white spots at the corner of his eyes, but he ignored them.

"I wouldn't joke about something like this, mate, I swear!" Traux said, alarmed.

"Rose and her mother! At the hospital! She was in the same bloody room as me! We ate lunch together a bunch of times!" Ron snapped.

There was no recollection in Truax eyes. The guy looked completely taken aback by Ron's words.

"Mate, I've never met either of those people before. I swear on my parent's lives, I have no idea what you're talking about!"

Harry watched Ron pace wearily. He exchanged glances with Hermione, worry lining her eyes as much as his own shown, he was sure. Was this what it was like? Harry wondered. He was once more struck by all those glances he'd hated. Those secret glances between Hermione and Ron when they were talking about him without words. When they were questioning him, worrying about him, discussing him, supporting him, talking behind his back. All those times and he'd never really thought of how it must be for them. To be

the outside looking in, trying to figure out how to handle the situation, how to help.

"You do," Ron shouted, the rough voice cracked, and Harry was struck with the reminder that Ron had been to therapy just that morning. It felt so long ago, now, but it had been but a few hours past. "You know her. You know them! I've..." Ron glanced his way. Blue eyes pleading with his own green. "I've sent letters. I've talked about her..."

The letters. So many letters where the young girl was mentioned. About the kindness Mrs. Salen had shown Ron. Harry could see the rising panic in his eyes. A welling surge, a need to fix this, somehow, overcame him. Harry wondered if *this* is what Ron and Hermione felt all those times.

When he claimed he heard voices in the walls in second year.

In fourth when he claimed he hadn't put his name in the cup.

In fifth when everyone believed he was a liar about Voldemort's rise.

Harry felt a surge of uncertainty for the story unfolding. But Ron. He believed in Ron one hundred percent, and even if he didn't understand what was going on. Even if Ron didn't understand what was going on, Harry felt a desire... no. A need to stand by his side. That they would figure this out.

"We know who you're talking about, Ron," Hermione rushed to assure. She had her arm around Ron and, Harry realized, was practically holding him up. Harry hurried forward, grasping Ron's other arm.

"Don't..." Ron rasped, panicked, "don't talk like that. Like I'm crazy. Like I'm making this shit up. I swear... Rose and Mrs. Salen are real. I've met them. Antea's met them!" Here Ron sent a glare at Traux, who looked like he wanted to shrink into the floor.

"We'll figure this out," Harry told him. "We'll figure out what's going on. Like always." And because Harry *knew* Ron needed to hear it he added. "I believe you. We both believe you. It's just about figuring out what's happened here."

"Let's think about this," Kingsley's deep voice rang out. Harry almost jumped. He'd forgotten Kingsley was even here. "You don't remember a Spinsor, who by the memories supplied, clearly exists, but you do remember a Rose and a Mrs. Salen. Maybe... it's all part of the same memories."

Ron shook his head.

"No, I met her in Australia. She was at the hospital. I met her at the hospital."

"Ron," Kingsley interrupted. "In the second memories supplied by Spinsor, I entered without Harry, in there I encountered a little girl. A little girl you seemed to know very well."

Ron's eyes were haunted as he looked Kingsley in the eye.

"What are you talking about? What little girl?"

"You never met Spinsor either," Harry interjected. "I think Kingsley's right Ron."

"I think," Hermione softly added, "that maybe the scars have been messing with your mind, Ron, not just your body. You said it yourself, that for some reason..." here Hermione chose her words carefully, mindful of the public around them. "The locket, Ron, for some reason it messed with your head worse than it did us."

"The shadow," Ron shuddered, the name he'd dubbed it the summer before sixth year springing to his lips. The nightmare he saw whenever he looked into the mirror. The reason he, long before he got so sick and became emaciated, started to avoid his reflection. It felt strange to let it slip from his lips, after coveting the secret for so



long, it felt strange to speak so casually about it. The idea that it had messed with his mind more than the nightmares, more than the way it had interacted with Voldemort, was a horrifying thought.

"Why would the shadow take away bad memories though?" Ron asked.

"Shadow?" Kingsley interrupted. "I think you've failed to inform us of all the information here."

At those words the man gave a pointed stare at Harry and Hermione. Kingsley worked with them after all, saw them on a daily basis.

"Oi! It's not their fault. I asked Harry not to say anything (though I'm sure the git told Hermione anyways)," Ron muttered the last part, sending Harry a glare that his best friend returned with a sheepish shrug.

"It's a figure in the mirror Ron sees, the reflected soul of the monster that attacked Ron and left its scars," Hermione answered. "It's the reason why the illness developed into a dark magical infection. If we can remove the soul of the creature from the scars, the magical infection should lessen in scope and depth."

"Pomfrey said it was just an echo of the soul," Ron said, eying Harry and Hermione with suspicion. "What makes you think..."

"It's the Bezoar!" Harry announced, before an argument could commence. "The Bezoar absorbed the poisoning and stop it from killing you, but it wasn't removed from your body. The poison has been sitting inside of you all this time!"

Hermione stepped up.

"The oak matured mead was laced with a special kind of poison Draco got from his father, we erm, that is to say, Harry and I..."

"We forced the information out of Draco," Harry said bluntly, no regret present in his features or in his heart.

"Oh mate, I really wish I was there for that," Ron tried to smile at him, but it fell apart halfway.

"The poison was Winter Nightshade," Hermione cut off, she reached for Ron's hand, pulling it to her chest. Harry felt a need to reach out as well, to wrap them both in his arms, but stilled it. "Winter Nightshade has magical properties. It's the preferred poison by dark wizards because its not traceable, but its very rare and even more expensive."

"Which is why Pomfrey thought the poison was gone. She never considered Winter Nightshade and the Bezoar absorbs harmful matter, so there was no need to remove it," Harry added.

"But the Bezoar changed into something else when it absorbed the Winter Nightshade. The magic transformed it, latching onto the thoughts in your scars, Ron," Hermione spoke fast. Harry could tell Ron wanted to say something, but Hermione plowed forward. "It made it into a different kind of stone. It has the scars thoughts and the Winter Nightshade and it developed into a dark magic core."

Harry was watching Ron's face though, and there was something very wrong. It reminded him of sixth year, when they'd been up in the air, during practice. When all the fight just sort of... left Ron. Left him with nothing. And that scared Harry.

"Hermione," Harry called, reaching out for her, but she was too excited, caught up in her explanations, enthralled by her research and triumphant. Because they had a plan. After so long of not knowing what to do or how to handle the situation they actually knew what to do.

"But this," Hermione pulled out a sparkling purple potion from her pocket, tiny stones shimmering inside the glass, "this will destroy the dark core, it will get rid of every last remnant of it, forcing it out

through your pores. It's a potion with a magically soaked Winter Nightshade grounded into it. It's an antidote, Ron."

Ron pulled Hermione's hands to him, two fingers fondly stroking from forehead to the bottom of her chin. His other arm, the badly damaged one, wrapped around her waist to bring her to him. Hermione was stunned, even more so when Ron bent down and kissed her forehead. Over bushy hair, Ron met Harry's eyes.

"Ron," Harry strolled forward, already bracing himself.

"Listen, Hermione, Harry," Ron started, searching for the right words. "This idea that you had... all this research you did, I appreciate it, but this illness..."

Hermione pulled away, hard and fast, glaring at Ron.

"You think we're wrong. You don't think this potion can save you."

"I *know* you're right about the Bezoar," Ron assured, "it's a toxic tumor, yeah?"

Hermione stiffened, eying him.

"That's one way to put it."

"Well..."

"KINGSLEY!"

Hestia Jones rushed up to them. Perspiration slid down her pale face as she came to a halt, frantic eyes on Ron as she spoke.

"Spinsor's gone."

Harry's stomach turned.

"I'm sorry?" Kingsley's asked. It was obvious though, from the way his jaw clenched, that he'd heard correctly.

"I was suspicious about the prisoner data, so I checked out the cells. Went by each and every one of them. All prisoners were accounted for, except one," Hestia informed them.

"Ray Spinsor," Harry breathed out, the name leaving him like a disease.

"Suppose," Ron said, searching the faces of the people around him, "that's bad?"

"You don't know?" Hestia demanded, voice an octave shrill.

"Long story," Traux sighed, "We think the Death Eaters..."

... or rather, someone," Kingsley cut in, "messed with Ron's memories. Wormtail obviously believes Ron to still have his memories intact, so it's hard to say."

"It's not like Wormtail was our only enemy though. The Death Eaters didn't exactly act as comrades. They were in it for themselves. It's possible another person was involved in the altered memories," Hermione intoned, tone bitter as she recalled Beatrice Lestrangle and the Malfoys.

"Or maybe this is all some fucked up joke," Ron said acidly, "maybe Wormtail doesn't even want to trade Antea for me. Maybe he just wants to hurt us. Make us run in circles like idiots while he kills her."

Silence touched the group, but things were said. In the way Hermione's mouth thinned with anger. In the weary slouch of Harry's shoulder's and the two step motion Traux carried with him since his arrival. One step nervous, one step unprepared, back and forth, around the group, by the group, in the middle of the group. Constantly moving, as it, since he wasn't able to do something, at least he could move in the direction of action, wherever that might be.

Finally, Kingsley broke the silence, that rage from before mellowed into a level authoritative calm that had gotten him elected Minister of Magic.

"Let's not give up before we've tried, yes? Let's get that second memory. After that, we'll see if Miss. Hestia is still as talented at memory charms as I remember."

---

Harry kept by his side as they entered the second memory. They were inside the pensive, inside a memory, so it was only their minds that had been temporarily transported, but that didn't stop Harry from holding him up, helping Ron to stand.

Ron didn't stop him. His nerves were shot to hell and weariness thick enough to smother a person dogged his steps. Ron had no desire to know what was in this memory, as far as he was concerned, anything that happened while he was gone only had the potential to drag him further into an abyss of guilt. Kingsley said he'd been captured. Kingsley said he'd been tortured for information. Kingsley claimed Ron had been nothing, but brave and strong and resilient. Considering everything that he had ever been and currently was, Ron couldn't imagine ever using one of those things to describe himself.

If there was one thing Ron had learned in the past year it was that Kingsley had a hell of a lot more respect for Ron than he rightly deserved. What if he'd given something away? What if he'd betrayed Harry while he'd been held prisoner? And how the bloody fuck had Ron escaped? That was the one thing that no one knew.

Ron had been by himself, apparently, inside a building filled to the brim with Death Eaters, chained, with no wand, yet he escaped? Ron Weasley escaped? Ron seriously fucking doubted that. But... memories of being beneath an icy surface came back to him. Maybe Ron hadn't been the one to do the escaping. Perhaps a Shadow had helped out.

Ron looked around the memory. A well-lit, wide hallway opened up to them. A very large man with brown, rugged looking hair came into view. Ron stiffened at the view. His head throbbed as all the air left his lungs.

*" You know, we're not so different, you and me."*

He shook at the voice, though the man didn't move towards them, wasn't looking at them at all, in fact. His lips weren't moving either. His hand tightened around Harry's shoulders.

"You recognize him?" Harry whispered.

"Not really," Ron answered, watching the man intently. "It's more like, serious Déjà vu with a heavy dosage of voices in my head."

"I think it's safe to say you've had some serious magic done to you," Hermione whispered.

The world shuddered.

The man named Spinsor fell to the ground.

Ron, Harry, and Hermione felt the shudder, but were not physically affected by it.

"... ta fuck?" Spinsor mumbled.

The large man stumbled to his feet. Hurrying towards the noise, a heavy limp in his step. His shoulder length greasy hair falling forward as he peered around the corner. The trio followed him, the halls opening up to a much wider walking space.

Then, a familiar figure. No silver hand. Eyes haunted. Clothes ripped and ill fitting, displaying a wobbling stomach. Terror lining his features. Running towards them like the hounds of hell were on his heels.

Wormtail.

"What the hell is going on?" Spinsor snapped.

Wormtail didn't pause. Didn't even look at Spinsor, his eyes glancing back down the hall fearfully and Ron was surprised to see that the man wore no shoes. Bloody footprints trailed behind the man, but no obvious gashes. It was more like it was simply sliding out of the man's pores like a layer of red perspiration. Spinsor tried to grab the man, but Wormtail, with more skill in spellwork than he'd ever demonstrated before, cast a spell outwards, rebounding Spinsor's hand with savage force as he disappeared down the hall.

"Useless, cowardly..." Spinsor mumbled, heading towards where the man disappeared from. Ron's eyes though, lingered on the now gone Wormtail. Staring at the foot prints. The wide set to them.

"I followed those," the words popped out.

"What?" Hermione asked, fearfully glancing down the hall.

"I followed those. They led me out," Ron said, though he couldn't recall the memory. It just sort of spilled out of him, naturally.

"We need to go," Harry said, motioning to the back of the quickly disappearing half troll.

Up ahead, Spinsor whistled. Ron let Harry pull him along as they made it around the corner. All three of them stopped short at the sight. Harry's hold on him faltered. Beside him, Hermione's face lost all color as she missed a step, grabbing at the wall to stop herself from falling.

It was a room. Doors wide open. Bodies were everywhere. Limbs detached. Blood just... just fucking everywhere. On the walls. Sliding across the floor. Dried in places, wet in others. A horrible black circle lined with candles half melted, but all smoking from extinguished flames. And just outside the door...

He was there.

The Ron of his lost memories.

His eyes were pitch black, a steady black good sliding down his cheeks, matching the stuff pouring out of his arms and leading to his hands. Hands that were forcibly closing the chest of a little girl. Wand work stitching it together. Shooting yellow light he recognized as shots of air, directly into the lungs. It didn't seem to be working though. The lungs jerked upwards, but then settled, not taking any air in.

As they got closer, a voice started screaming at him, clawing at his mind, attacking him with such ferocity it left him staggering.

No.

No.

*NO!*

It was..."

"Rose?" Ron croaked.

What was going on? Ron pushed away from Harry and Hermione to stagger over to the child. It was the same scene as in the hospital. Her lungs were exposed as hands tried desperately to repair the damage inside them, only... it was his hands. Blood covered hands, the red stretching up his arms, covering the torn, ragged clothes he wore, splattering his face. But red wasn't the only color. Black.

On either side of him, Harry and Hermione stood, eyes wide and horrified.

Black throbbing threads, over lacing his own scars, pulsed with a life of their own. The black threads seemed alive as they oozed black tar like goo from the scars. They were stretching out from his being, trying to touch Rose, but each time they came near, the Ron of then snarled viciously and they retracted.



"I got ya," he was muttering. "You're fine. You're fine. It's almost closed."

"R-on," Rose whispered.

"Shhhh, Abby, don't try to talk. It's okay. I've got you, Abigail."

Ron glanced at Harry and Hermione, confusion warring inside of him.

"Abigail? No, no, that's... that's Rose."

Beside him, Hermione reached out, closing her hand around his hand.

"What is she doing here then, Ron?" Hermione urged. He could hear the caution in her voice, the way she prodded at him to try to understand the information. Harry's eyes were on something else, but when he spoke it was with such fierce care and loyalty, Ron nearly melted in gratitude.

"They've messed with your head, Ron, but it's still all there. Whatever they've done. We'll fix it. I will *hunt* down the fuckers who did this to you and I'll make them *fix* this. And we'll do it together. I won't leave you behind. You hear me, Ron? I won't let you go anywhere either, not alone. Never again."

Clapping broke their conversation apart. Tore their eyes from the two Ron's to the large troll of a man. Spinsor stood, eyeing the Ron of the past in amusement. Ron watched his own head snap up. He looked animalistic. The way he crouched over the girl, bringing out a wand, the tip shooting out a spell without so much as a word.

It was as that Ron was moving that something caught his eye. It was his jacket. His old one. Maroon. Ron clutched as at the cobalt blue one he wore, noticing with alarm that it matched the one the girl was wearing. And the maroon one was moving! Ron moved towards the

little girl and his old jacket at the same time the Ron of the past moved forward, stationing himself in front of Rose... the girl.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ron saw Spinsor dive out of the way, pulling out his own wand. Memory Ron continued shooting off spells, black tar sliding down his arms like sweat, splattering the floor as he continued the pace, forcing Spinsor on the defensive. The man didn't back down though, he gained inch by inch, smiling in an unhinged sort of manner.

"She's dead!" Spinsor called, his voice strangely searching. As if he were talking out of bewilderment rather than cruelty. "Don't matter what 'appens to her now."

Memory Ron swore, with a vicious slash a familiar blue of Sectumsempra slammed against Spinsor's barrier. It cracked. Memory Ron growled, each word accompanied by a spell crashing into the quickly expiring shield.

"She isn't going to die. I'm going to save her. All. I. Need. To. Do. Is. Kill. YOU!"

Ron bent down to the maroon jacket, staring with wide eyes at the blood and membrane covered babe. Blue eyes blinked up at him. Mouth quivering, hand reaching, but not quite touching Rose... the little girl's hand.

A little girl and a baby.

Mary's children.

"She's as good as dead, boy, look at her chest! Look at yourself! You're a walking corpse. You'll be dead too, soon enough, whether I kill you or your wounds do."

Memory Ron stumbled, his knees giving out.

He heard Hermione give out a shriek. Saw her bend down towards the past Ron. Her fingertips faded as they tried to grip him. Harry was beside her, gently pulling her away, his arms tugging at her, bringing her into his embrace. Hermione accepted the demand, fist shoved partly into her mouth, elbows protectively held against her breasts.

They were grieving *for* him.

They were watching their best friend *die* .

Ron stared at his memory self; so much rage and hatred bundled in the tensing of his muscles and the readiness to strike, so much fear in his movements, his body acting as a shield where he wasn't sure his magic would suffice. What *happened* here?

He tried to picture the hospital room Rose died in. The people gathered around the room. Mary hysterical. Talking to Rose. The open chest...

Ron felt his insides turn as he glanced down at Rose. What wasn't *he* dead yet? Ron was the one supposed to die. Not this little girl. He was the one who failed. Who was captu... Ron's body throbbed. A hammer like force tightened around his skull. Captured. He'd been in Hogemeade. Hadn't he? He wanted to check on Ginny.

It slipped from him. Escaping like water in the palm of his hands.

"Mummy, I'm scared."

The voice startled him. Ron looked down at Rose. Her eyes were glassy and pained.

"Mummy's not here right now, Abby," Memory Ron murmured, dragging himself back, keeping his wand pointing at an encroaching Spinsor. "Ron's here though. I'm gonna get you out. Just look at me. Don't look down. Think of Alfred or the Fair. Anything. Just... keep your eyes focused on me and stay awake."

"Don't leave me," Rose begged him. "Don't leave me, daddy."

"Never," Memory Ron told her, earnest and loving. "Do you remember what Mary taught me? Repeat it in your head."

"It hurts!"

"I know. I know it hurts, but I need you to keep yourself awake. Think of the thing Mary taught us."

"I can't..." blood slipped out of her mouth. She started to cough. It was dribbling everywhere.

No.

He can't lose her again.

"Hermione!" Ron called, staring her in the eye. She raced forward, grabbing onto him, hands clenching around his shaking form. "What do I do?"

"Ron," Harry called, looking pale and worn, "Ron, this is a memory."

Memory Ron cast a barrier, his hands were shaking as he wove a spell, the threads of magic sinking into Rose's shoe even as Spinsor cast spells against the bubble shield.

"You're *making* a port key, Ron," Hermione whispered in awe.

"He's what?" Harry asked.

"He's making a port key! There are some basic instructions on it, but you need training from a professional to *know* how to do it. It's a trade secret. That's why it's so expensive!"

Memory Ron didn't get to use it though, as the last of the threads were absorbed by the shoe, Spinsor came barrowing through, wand raised. Like the broken gears of a clock Memory Ron swung around, the beginnings of a barrier forming around his body. It wouldn't be

enough though, Ron knew, staring at the forming shield and Spinsor's leer.

Then the unexpected.

Memory Ron used the barrier as a battering ram. It slammed into Spinsor, sending them both to the ground. A baby's wail drowned out their grunts. The black threads around Ron's body lashed out, like shadows extending from his person. It ripped at Spinsor's clothes, burning his body, leaving dark marks along his arms, legs, and chest. The man screamed, sharp and piercing. And then a clatter.

The deluminator, torn from one of Spinsor's pockets. Memory Ron scooped it up, turning and running in the other direction. Towards the children. Bending down to pick up the babe was more of an awkward fall, Ron winced as he heard his past knees hitting the ground. Baby in his arms, Rose's torso in the other, he reached down and grabbed the shoe.

The memory ended. Leaving them standing at the Ministry once more. Before Ron even had time to contemplate the horror of the memory, he had an arm full of witch and wizard. Hermione tucked against his right side, his bad arm pulled over her petite shoulders, eyes so big and fearful Ron felt compelled to drown in them. Under his left arm, Harry held him up, strong arms around his waist to keep him in place. Harry's eyes were a strange mix. Unyielding unfathomable understanding.

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Back in fifth year, shortly after Voldemort discovered he could hurt Harry by forcing visions into his mind, Ron hadn't known what to say to his friend to help him. It had been beyond his comprehension to understand, and Ron had known it. That fact had sat in his chest like worms of stone, hard and moving, leaving him feeling sick and useless.

As always, it seemed, Hermione knew what to say, even if Harry didn't seem to appreciate it. His best friend had tried his damnest to

push them away. But they'd pushed back. Even when Harry himself hadn't been certain about his worth and sanity, he and Hermione stood their ground and kept by his side.

That was before the war though, almost three years ago, before trust was broken.

Harry and Hermione said they'd forgiven him, but Ron didn't believe them. Not really. He was sure they were both sincere, no, that wasn't the problem. It was that he *knew* them. They *wanted* to forgive him, but it didn't mean they *had* forgiven him. And who? Who on the face of the planet, could blame them?

Ron had walked out on them.

He'd made the decision to leave them.

It showed sometimes. When he was angry and slammed a door on his way out, just to get mil or butter, or sometimes to cool off, but there would be this look... a startled look, like they weren't sure if he was going to be back or not. It showed when they had nightmares. A pale face with hands reaching and grabbing onto him, bushy hair trying to merge into his chest. Or fierce green eyes that pushed him away when they woke, started to shout, only to remember himself. And then a grim, half hurt, half sorry look would cloud features he knew so well. In both cases, Ron would stay until the fear disappeared, until the anger and resentment faded. It hurt to stay, but Ron figured it was just one of those things he deserved.

Yet...

At eighteen Ron was sure he'd lost his fucking mind, but low and behold, Harry and Hermione were there. On either side of him. And they didn't seem to have any intent to run for the hills. He hoped these feelings of gratitude and love were what Harry had felt back then. Cause Ron sure as hell didn't think he'd managed to inspire either in his friend.

But unlike the situation with Harry, Ron didn't think he deserved the faith these two had in him. Because none of this made a lick of sense, and there was an inkling in the back of his mind that he'd fucked up big, somehow. Ron wasn't Harry Potter. He wasn't the hero. He wasn't talented like Harry and he wasn't smart like Hermione. So this mess... this whole mess he'd brought them into, that he'd brought Antea into, was on him.

"Magic," Hermione stressed, as if she were talking to a simpleton, "*cannot* be used on his body. It *cannot* penetrate him in any way or it will worsen the infection. It will irritate the potions in his system right now."

Hestia Jones stood her ground though.

"Now that we know his memories have been altered, I can jostle them a bit. I might even be able to completely restore them if the work down was flimsy enough."

There was doubt in the woman's voice though. Ron couldn't blame her, picturing Lockhart in St. Mungo's completely wiped of his mind and personality. Memory Charms were some of the most difficult magic around. It took someone infinitely familiar with the mind in order to successfully master them.

"Absolutely not!" Hermione hissed, Ron was very thankful she had blunt nails, otherwise the vise like grip might have drawn blood.

"Why don't you let him decide that?" Hestia gestured at him.

"His answer is no," Hermione retorted, sneaking a glance at him. Ron felt her eyes searching, trying to make eye contact with him. "Ron? Don't be stupid."

It was a plea and a reprimand all in one, because she was tracing his thoughts while he thought them. Throwing up counter arguments and probably even damning herself for the pretty speech she'd made to Harry earlier. Because at the end of the day she'd fought her war.

She wanted to bring her boys home and make a difference in the world that didn't involve questioning whether she'd be around to see the difference.

Ron understood.

Part of the reason why he ran in the first place was because he wanted to keep that frame of mind up. He wanted to protect her and Harry from those hard lines he'd earned. That they'd earned in his absence anyways, but probably not as much.

"Do it."

"There is no guarantee that this will help!" Hermione lashed out, anger tight enough to snap a viola's line. "Your treatment was this morning! You are at your most vulnerable, when magic can hurt you the worst! That's why I haven't given you... I mean to say..." Hermione paused, as if she'd betrayed herself.

Harry, having been strangely silent stared at Ron, as if sizing him up.

"You're a lot steadier on your feet than this morning," Harry said quietly.

"Still standing, yeah."

"But do you promise? You promise to stay standing? No matter what?"

Harry's voice was steel; sharp and hard.

"You know better than to ask that, Harry."

"You're asking a lot from me here too, *Ron*."

"You'll be with me? The whole time?"

He knew the answer, of course, didn't need to ask it, but he felt in the shaking trembling limbs attached to him that Hermione needed to



hear it. Harry too.

"Always," Harry whispered.

"Then I promise," Ron said, "to claw myself from the grave itself if I have to. I won't falter. I won't fall."

Harry hugged him. His smaller hands grabbing onto Ron and Hermione like a life line. Gripping him in the same manner as so many months ago when Hermione plunged out of the sky, even further back, when Ron was the last to arrive safe and sound at the Burrow after the battle where Hedwig and Mad Eye were murdered.

Ron turned to Hestia, nodding his head firmly.

Ron braced himself as Hestia pointed her wand directly in the center of Ron's forehead.

"This will hurt," Hestia warned, "but you can take it."

---

His mind cracked against a barrier of light. Ron screamed as he was deflected. When he opened his eyes, it was not to the sight of Hestia though, but to a giant orb of bright light, encircling small bubbles of black and blue strands. Memories, Ron realized, but most of them were pitch black. Even the few blue strands inside the barrier had tinges of black to them. It reminded him of his Patronus. The Boston Terrier struggling to stay solid, being consumed by the dark threads in its being.

Hestia's spell had made a tiny spider web like crack. A black thread caught in the edges of one of them, just barely out of the orb. Ron shuddered, mentally reaching his arms out for the tiny thread. When his fingers touched it, it was like holding onto the clammy small hands of death.

For a moment Ron hesitated. He really didn't want to remember this. He didn't want anything to do with what he might have done. Had he

betrayed Harry? Had he told Voldemort anything that the man had used to kill people?

A small bubble outside of the orb floated by. Antea and him sitting in front of Hugo's grave. She was speaking to him, but Ron, the Ron of now at least, couldn't hear the words being exchanged. She was crying, tears gliding down her dark cheeks, hair sticking to the tears as her shoulder's shook.

Resolve solidified, Ron grasped the dark thread worming its way out of the orb and yanked with all of his might. It came free with four vicious tugs, swirling until it formed a small orb, like his other memories, restoring itself to its original frame inside his mind.

The memory came slow, but when it finally fit together as one entire piece, Ron fought to keep his head from coming to a halt. The details so fresh and powerful, it was horrifying and confusing how he could ever forget. Forget them. Forget the bridge. The dementors. The Shadow.

Everything.

The memory's details crucified him anew.

Then clicked into place as if they'd always been there.

Ron had a pocket full of wands, a child under one arm, a baby in the other, and two sliced open wrists still bleeding, making him wonder how he wasn't dead yet. A dozen or so Dementors on his arse and more than a few Death Eaters hastened his steps only so much. Ron was sure he should have gotten them killed at least twice. As it was, if none of them were on his tail, he was pretty sure he'd still be royally fucked.

He ducked under a bridge. Feet sliding down rock and a collection of jagged, broken tree branches. Within minutes he had the two kids on the ground, wand out, protection barriers going up one after another. All accompanied by the plop, plop, plop of dark matter sliding from

the gaping wounds on his arms, down his back and gliding along the curve of his cheeks. The shadow chortled in the back of his mind and Ron knew he'd damned himself to something horrible by taking its hand.

Couldn't think about that now.

The babe was wailing. Abigail wasn't moving. The dementor's were coming. The shadow inside of him was the only thing keeping him on his feet (most likely the only reason he hadn't dropped dead yet too). There was no regret. He just had to keep moving. Keep standing until... just, he had to stay standing. That was that.

A bare heart beat under his fingers. Coming to a spot more defendable than any he'd crossed in the past mile, Ron set the babe down, then dropped to his knees, watching helplessly as Abigail jerked, convulsing as the open chest gaped at him. He whipped one of the stolen wands into his hand, concentrating on stitching skin. His black magic glowed around the little girl, keeping the organs pumping past their expiration date. Expanding the lungs in a jagged bid for air. Ron urged the skin to pull tight, but there was too much missing. A portion of the lung was gone and Ron had no potions or time to create anything remotely close to what she needed.

*' You could use your own though.'*

Ron blinked at the thought, looking down at his own chest. Was he skilled enough for that? Could he take her place? Abigail looked up at nothing. Chest heaving in quick short intakes, blood coming out in globs.

Ron closed his eyes. Hermione would know a spell. She would know how to do this. He tried to think. Tried to remember anything to do with healing the body. With transferring living material into another human being. All he could think of were healing charms though. Cuts. Slices. Gauges. Bruises.

He had nothing.

He wasn't a healer.

No. Don't think like that.

Ron scrambled for the deluminator, holding it above Abigail, trying not to think about what was coming. When he was little and fell out of the tree, Ron had broken his leg and fixed it, right? What had he done? He'd wanted it. He'd wanted all the pain to go away. He'd wanted his hurt to be gone.

Well, Ron wanted *this* hurt to go away, more than anything he'd ever wanted.

Concentrate.

The deluminator in one hand and his wand in the other, he put both across the open chest of Abigail. Ron let the light of the deluminator shine over them, willing the light to swirl around Abigail, to do what he needed it to do. He willed all of his magic into his hands. He felt them heat up, felt his whole body itch with magic. He felt his wrists stitching back together. Felt Abigail's frame pulling itself into one whole being.

*Heal .*

He urged. Give her mine. Give her strength. Ron concentrated, letting his love, his life, his magic, his everything... shoving it all into his hands and into her. And then he felt it.

Its arms were around him. Its embrace against his back and along his arms. A darkness that shadowed the light. Ron tugged away from it, willing the light in his hands to expand, to push it out and to continue healing. It lashed out.

The pain Ron had felt building in the past year or so exploded inside his body. Ron screamed, his cry joining the wailing babe as his body felt as if he were being ripped apart from the inside out. The light around his hands dimmed.

The healing ceased, leaving the very center of the wound unhealed, a set of lungs moving tiredly up and down before shuddering and stilling.

No.

Ron reached his arm out, trying to touch her, but his body was aflame. His skin stretched too tightly against his muscles, a spasm attacking them as his fingers twitched to reach. A gurgling mess of words half words sputtered out as he pulled himself forward.

Abigail didn't move though. She was staring at the ceiling of the bridge with glazed over eyes. Tears drying on either side of her cheek. Her ruined blue hoodie covered in matted flesh and muscle.

No. No. No.

"Abigail?" Ron rasped.

It was as he touched her cooling body that Ron saw his hands were black. His arms were wrapped in black thread. His scars... they were throbbing with dark matter. Baby Rose sobbed her little heart out, feet away.

His forehead scraped against rock as he tried to will light back into his hands. Tried to force back the shadow bent on consuming him. Patronus. He needed his patronus. Light thoughts. The best thoughts. He closed his eyes as the shadow wrapped around his heart.

He thought of Hermione, soaking wet with sweat, emerging from the depths of the library. A triumphant, annoyingly smug look on her face.

He thought of Harry, coming off the pitch, dirty, but grinning, the snitch compliant in his hands.

The snitch.

Harry's first snitch.

A clue they couldn't figure out.

The Hocruxes.

Leaving.

His hold on the good thoughts cracked. He felt the shadow's greedy fingers tighten. Its eager form pulling at Ron's light, devouring it. Everything was shutting down. He felt it. An icy thread making its way through his body.

Abigail's corpse only an inch from his hold.

Failure.

Hermione's face came to mind. Her tears. Her scream for him to come back.

Harry's anger slammed into his with fresh accusations. The argument they'd had. Throwing the locket at them. Out of his mind with the voices and the darkness, crowding in on him, but most of all, the look of betrayal on Harry's face.

Ron wasn't strong enough.

Not to withstand the shadow.

Not to protect Hermione.

Not to stand by Harry's side.

Not to save Mary.

Not to save Abigail.

Not to save...

Ron's breathing hitched as the sound of a baby's wail continued to fill the air. An air much colder than before. Devoid of happiness and light. Dementor's were here. They were ignoring him, but they were sniffing out Rose.

They were getting closer and closer.

If Ron couldn't save her by beating the darkness then... Ron would invite it in.

Fully.

The Dementor's came in one large pack. They swarmed like locusts. Shadowlike robes trailed the barrier he'd hastily thrown up, the creatures fanged faces peeking under the bridge. Their heads tilted as they seemingly listened to the sounds of a baby's wail and a screaming teen.

The shadow grinned. Ron felt it sink into his bones. Knew the moment it began to spread along the entirety of his body. Before it had ravaged against his body's magic, but now... Now it ravaged against his physical body.

It felt as if the Shadow was peeling his skin back, like it was growing thick roots around every joint and muscle, expanding there until it fit into the nooks and crannies of his being. There was a noise now, louder than the baby's wail. Ron was startled to find it was him. His voice had cracked and he was screaming. It sounded horrific. Like a dying animal.

There was one good thing though.

Out of his peripheral Ron could see the dementors had stopped their approach. The louder he screamed the more they seemed hesitant to come anywhere near him... them. His chin on the ground, arms underneath him, Ron reached for the pit of darkness and took hold of it. He felt more than saw the throbbing scars on his arms twist, threads of darkness lifting up just enough to in case him in a

protective layer. Instead of memories of light, Ron took all of the pain in his heart, all the images and memories of hurt.

His mum... the way she looked passed him.

Fred and George, who chose to share their secrets with Harry instead of him.

Ginny, who hadn't looked at him with anything but contempt since the Department of Mysteries.

The teachers who saw nothing in him worth note.

His classmates, those fucking questions in their eyes when they saw him next to Harry.

The argument.

The way Harry's eyes lit up in anger at him.

The resentment he'd seen in Hermione's eyes as he forced her to choose.

The hatred Ron felt certain they must feel for him.

Mary's death.

Abigail...

All the failures up until now.

And then he released it. Black magic spanned out from his body. The dementors fled. Ron wasn't sure what to think of that. If the Shadow was just that frightening or if it was something else. Perhaps if the dementor's sucked out light then a place where there was the opposite took something from them?

He didn't know and he didn't care.



The shadow, spent of its energy, retracted back into his skin. Ron felt relief, but knew that now that he'd finally given it, that things were only going to get worse. He could only hope to get Rose as far away from him as possible and then...

Then what? Whatever he'd done with the shadow, whatever he'd agreed to or accepted, could he really bring that sort of trouble to Harry and Hermione? Besides that... would they even except him back if he apologized?

No, he couldn't imagine them forgiving him.

But maybe if he told them everything, maybe if he came clean about what was happening to him and why it was that he left... then what? Ron looked over at Abigail, the little girl's body causing Ron to flinch. He was too drained to cry. Too exhausted to feel empty. Too hurt to let it truly hurt him.

Touching the wand hurt.

His magic felt torn and useless. He knew, without trying, that his magic wouldn't work for him. In a daze, he peered at the baby, who'd finally stopped crying. Funnily enough. Apparently being manhandled by a Death Eater from her mother's womb, escaping a castle of murderous wizards, being on the run through a swamp like forest, and going head to head with a group of Dementors was enough to tire the babe out.

And then a thought struck him.

Half numb, Ron stumbled to his feet, scooping the baby up in barely functioning arms. The baby breathed peacefully, wrapped in his torn maroon jacket, dried blood and gore stuck to her skin. Alive.

For one fearful moment Ron thought he killed the baby.

He dragged himself to her, pulling her to him like a lifeline, cradling her head in his weak arms. She blinked up at him tiredly. Ron felt

warm tears of relief slide down his face as she grasped onto his thumb.

Then he looked towards Abigail.

What was he supposed to do? He couldn't leave he...

The sound of charging feet announced the deafening encroachment of Death Eaters and Snatchers. He still wasn't far enough away from the castle and its enchantments. He wasn't far enough to disappear. With a heart breaking glance at Abigail, Ron staggered through water, holding the baby above the slow paced, but icy depths. Dragging himself out on the other side, he felt the pull at his magic stop. He was out of the anti-apparition field, on a small crooked little path just under the bridge.

Shouts dogged him from all around. Ron hugged Rose to him, picturing the small muggle train station Hermione had shown him once while they'd been staking out the Ministry. He pictured the bench they'd sat at, holding a newspaper between them so as to remain hidden. Her warm brown eyes nervously checking the entrance way.

As he turned, he saw four or so Death Eaters pointing wands at him, all standing in front of Abigail. As if she were nothing. A pure sort of hatred clutched his heart. He felt the Shadow latch onto as he and Rose disappeared. He'd kill them. He'd kill every last one of them. His eyes met Spinsor's own. A foul kind of awe on the half troll's face.

And just like that, Ron was gone.

The black bubble of a memory floated before him. Ron felt himself thrown back. Thrown once more in front of Hestia. Both more confused and more informed than he'd been but a few minutes prior. His limbs felt as if they'd had the bones taken from him. He would have fallen, but soft, petite hands braced his back, while hard, calloused hands snaked around his waist. Ron took their hold

gratefully, trying to not let his head lag onto one of their shoulders. The discoveries swimming to the forefront of his mind.

He'd escaped from somewhere.

He'd managed to get two little girls out, though one of them, Ron swallowed hard, picturing the child, one of them who looked remarkably like Rose died there. He hadn't been good enough to save her. And what about the other one? Where was the baby?

And the disease, the dark magical infection, Ron had *let it in* . He'd let the Shadow infect him. His scars seemed to throb with the thought, delighted, it seemed. Let it in so that they wouldn't die, condemned himself to a slower death in order to save a baby.

Ron's mind whirled at, wracking his brain to fit all the pieces together. Three weeks of memories. Three weeks just... gone. Yet... the words said. He remembered them. Just not in that order, not in that way. Rose hadn't died like that. Not in a small castle, but in a hospital room. She hadn't been named Abigail, but her lungs had shown open and exposed for the world to see. He'd been forced to leave her body. He'd been consumed by cold, but in a river. How far did these false memories invest themselves inside his brain?

"So," Hesitia said slowly, testing him out, "what did you see? Did it help?"

Ron blinked, looking around at everyone.

"I can get us close," Ron finally said. "Just not... it's located somewhere that has an anti-apparition ward. I can get us just outside of it, but I don't know where from there we have to go. And even then..."

"You can't guarantee it's the place Wormtail talked about," Kingsley finished, nodding.

Kingsley signaled for the group to mobilize. Ron pulled his blue hoodie closer to him, pausing as he looked down at it. Blue. He tried to remember when he started wearing blue. Why he picked it up. He'd bought it around the same time he'd gotten Dobby, Harry's baby owl. It was the same Cobalt blue the little girl wore.

"Ron can't apparate right now," Hermione intoned darkly, "and we've already performed magic on him once." The dark look she shot at Hestia was missed by no one. "We need a pensive so that Ron can extract the memory to show us."

Kingsley shook his head, features grim.

"That wouldn't work. It isn't enough to see a picture of a place. You have to have actually been there in order to apparate to it. Ron is the only one who can travel there. We just need him to do it once with another person and then they can travel back to get the rest of us."

They were at the apparition point now. A dozen Aura's, the Minister of Magic, and the golden trio, standing not so tall, but at least standing.

"Alright, let's do this," Ron agreed, straightening himself out with a thorough shake.

"I..." Harry hesitated.

His best friend's eyes were unfocused, staring at Ron's torn up arms, lingering on his waning frame, before finally meeting Ron's eyes. There was a helpless look on Harry's face Ron had never seen before. This time around it was Ron who was in danger. It was Ron who was at the center of all the trouble going on. Ron understood where Harry was coming from. Had felt the sentiment only too many times. The need to reach out and kidnap him, to hide him away from all the danger and tell the rest of the world to bugga off. They couldn't have Ron's best friend as some sacrificial lamb.

But now Ron was the one up for slaughter.

"Using too much magic will kill you, Ron," Hermione whispered, voice that gentle mix of furious and concerned only she could pull off. The room before them murmured in disquiet. Ron looked Harry in the eyes, the icy set of blue clashing against warm green. Ron smiled reassuringly, holding out his arm for Harry to take, giving Harry the same choice Ron had been handed time and time again.

"If you don't apparate with me, then I'll do it myself."

After only a moment, Harry conceded, putting his arm through Ron's and securing his best friend to his side. Ron pictured the bridge in his mind. The sediment under his feet, the river rushing by, too quiet to be natural, magically silenced. He pictured the crooked space under the bridge where Rose... where the child named Abigail died. Using Harry to steady himself, Ron side along apparated the both of them to his forgotten escape route.

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They landed in icy water.

Ron sputtered, as he was tugged under, but strong arms gripped ahold of him and pulled at him hard. He heard more than saw Harry gasping, felt the tug of magic as they were both ripped out of the river. Ron rolled over, peering at the spot they were just at. The entire area where he, Abigail and the baby had been didn't exist anymore. The river surged, overflowing and crashing against the hill they sat on.

"That," Ron started, teeth chattering with cold, "was not underwater last time I was here."

Harry rolled his eyes, hiding a smile.

"You don't say?"

"Shut up, Harry."

"And after that dramatic speech," Harry drawled.

"It was one line!"

Harry chuckled as he stood up. Ron pushed himself to his knees, intending to do the same, but paused as his body shuddered in sharp agony. Gripping his arms in a tight hold and gritting his teeth against the pain, Ron stumbled to his feet. Harry caught him, pulling him up, the smile replaced by grim lines.

"Don't tell Hermione I did that," Ron warned, "I've got one over on her still for splinching me and if she knows I chuckled up on this then she can start lecturing me again on apparating. It's the *one* thing I've gotten her to not talk my ear off about!"

The joke fell flat though.

Harry hurriedly cast a warming charm on the both of them, drying their clothes, before they took a good look around them. Harry tugged out his invisibility cloak from his bag, with careful hands, he tied the cloak around Ron's neck.

"I'll be right back. Don't go off by yourself, yeah?"

"What? Am I five?"

Harry squeezed his shoulder, his green eyed stare intense.

"Seriously Ron."

"There are no prophecies out there that say I need to die in order to save the world," Ron joked.

Harry's grin was half a grimace.

"After today, we're going to have to sit down and have a long talk," Harry told him.

"What?" Ron squeaked, "Don't tell me there *IS* one..."

But Harry was already disappearing away.

"I bet my tea leaves did spell 'die' at some point," Ron huffed as he took in the scene before him, feeling weak in the knees. Seriously? What was wrong with the world? Briefly he wondered if somewhere out there Tralawney was drinking tea, watching as her leaves and chuckling to herself.

It didn't take Harry long. Soon the entire group had been transported and gone to work. Ron pulled out his next potion from the bag Harry carried, downing it in one as Hermione fretted beside him.

"How are you holding up?" Hermione asked.

"As well as to be expected," Ron muttered. He pointed east, towards woods thicker than the others. An uninviting air about the area twining between its outreaching branches. "I came from that direction. I don't think I got too far before the bridge. My wrists were slit and Rose... Abigail's chest was split open, so I don't think..."

"What?" Hermione hissed.

"Later..." Harry snapped, looking a tad green. "We'll talk about all this later. We go east then?"

Ron nodded.

"East, across the river and into the thickest part of the forest," Ron confirmed. "There's a barrier keeping the place hidden."

Kingsley who'd wandered over to them shortly after his arrival, relayed the orders to the group. Unlike Ron's stench in the river, they actually used the bridge to cross the overflowing river.

They made it to the barrier soon enough. The Aurors fanning out. Hestia wandered over at some point with Kingsley, grim looks beset upon their faces.

"Barrier is designed to only allow select members through," Hestia told them.

"It appears," Kingsley jumped in, "that it will take at the minimum of a few hours to break the barrier. We don't know the spell work that would give a person entrance."

His eyes lingered on Ron, making him squirm. His memories were still lost to him, without a way to get to them, he didn't know any more than what he'd already told. He felt the eyes of the other aurors on him too, but no one was saying a word.

It wasn't until several minutes had passed and the others had wandered away that Ron realized why Kingsley had stared at him so intently. The man had known, but hadn't been willing to say it out loud. No one could get through the barrier without the proper spell work. Probably a key word ingrained in the enchantments. Something only the Death Eaters knew so that only members who'd had the spell cast on them could enter.

Except... Ron had already been inside the area. The shield was designed to keep people out, but if he'd already been spelled to enter the place... That was why this place was perfect. Out of everywhere Wormtail could have demanded he meet Ron, he picked the one place that only Ron could enter, because he'd been given access as a prisoner. They'd never meant for Ron to escape. Some seventeen year old against countless numbers of Death Eaters and Dementors... Ron certainly wouldn't have placed bets on him either.

And now-

Antea was there. Being tortured. Possibly dead. The young woman who'd reached out to Ron out of loneliness, who'd suffered the death of her family, the demolishment of any possible future children, and who'd leached onto the company of a dying teen because of it. All alone. With *him*.

A traitorous rat of a man who was just smart enough to be dangerous and just desperate enough to mean his threats. Still, how had he escaped the silver claw? Ron had watched it choke the life



out of Wormtail. Harry remembered that too. That wasn't Ron's fucked up memories. That actually happened.

A port key could get out, but not in.

A person held captive could get in, but not out.

No one here knew how to make a port key.

No one, but Ron could get in.

Ron wouldn't be able to get out.

Not without his memories intact.

Ron took a measuring look at the Aurors around them. Working hard. Casting enchantments. Slowly breaking through the barriers.

' *A few hours,*' Kingsley said.

And maybe it had been a good long time since Ron had been able to sit down at a game of chess, but there was still a part of him that considered himself a knight for a select few. He wasn't a kid anymore and he was too sick to hold any sort of a shield or sort or wand for that matter, but he knew all the pieces on the board. Knew how they moved. Knew their talents and skills. Knew their intentions. Knew the enemy.

In this game the enemy wouldn't wait to be hunted down by Aurors. Cowards and desperate men were men of action. Wormtail was a coward a hundred over and Ron was pretty fucking desperate. Together they made an end game that would be resolved long before these Aurors ever made it passed the barrier.

Sometimes a game of chess was won by leaving the King and Queen behind. Ron's eyes landed on Harry and Hermione. Close by, hovering anxiously where the action was, but sticking near to him.

Ron wouldn't fight.

No, Ron honestly couldn't fight, not in his state.

But he could draw attention away from Antea. Ron could get in, draw Wormtail to other parts of the area, stall until the Aurors got there. A couple hours. A lifetime could happen in a few hours. Ron knew that.

*' Your lad and lass, why aren't they here, boyo? I've heard enough about them that it don't make much sense. I'm thinking there's a lie here. Lies are all well and pretty, ya know, but least you can do is make it believable. And I ain't been doin' much believin' in this one.'*

*' They'd be here if they could,' Ron hedged.*

*' Cause of work,' Antea said, her eyes peered over Ron's head, looking out the window of the hospital room. 'I remember you said your lass's name, when you came down with that fever and I found ya all sick and miserable. There was something a little bit too devastated... a little too relieved- it didn't sit right in me gut. Work isn't the reason they ain't here.'*

*Ron was too weary for this game though, so he proposed another.*

*' Bring anymore stones?'*

*Antea's eyes came down with a lazy drop, the dark, thick curls bunching around her chin as she considered the subject change he was offering. She dug into her pockets, pulling out two palm sized stones.*

*' We aiming for pretty or ugly today?' she asked.*

*' I'm feeling sadistic this morning.'*

*' Ugly it is then.'*

*' Rodent or bird?'*

*' Nurses will skin us if any more rodents run amuck.'*

' Good point.'

*They raised their wands, the staff would be pissed, but there was something about the small use of magic that eased the tight ball of stress in him. A small transfiguration contest tended act like a sledgehammer in breaking down those walls, even if it did hurt like hell afterwards.*

Ron knew all the details, but frankly he could give two fucks. With all the practice of being the sixth son in a magical family and having Harry Potter as your best friend, he wandered away unseen. Casual, as if he were aiming to meet Kingsley, speaking with a group of Aurors near the barrier.

The thing though, was that even if the rest of the world tended to ignore Ronald Weasley, there were two figures who have kept part of their attention on him, even if it was just their anger or frustration, at all times. It had heightened to a point since the war, that when the others moved there was a mental tick in the back of their minds keeping pace, tracking where the other two were. So, when he veered just the tiniest little from the path toward Kingsley and more in the path of the barrier, he wasn't the least surprised at the sound of Harry cursing.

Ron took off.

Hands grabbed at him. He even shied away from a spell or two. It was as he touched the barrier that a shriek caused him to half turn. Hermione was reaching for him. Tears brimming in her eyes, her body launched to grab ahold of him, and Ron winced in sympathy because she would be too late. She would hit the barrier. He could already feel his body sliding through the magic, causing already aching bones to throb in pain.

Just before he crossed over, he felt the tips of her fingers against his. Warm. Felt the rough edge of ragged nails where she bit them out of stress. The soft ink stained skins from research and page turning. So different from Harry's calloused quidditch fingers. Nails hard and

round and perfect looking because Harry would rather huff and puff angrily around when he was stressed.

And then he was on the other side, watching Hermione bounce off the barrier, right into Harry's arms. His hands wrapped around her shoulder's as he stared at the barrier in disbelieving horror. They couldn't see Ron, but Ron could see them. Hermione's hands were pressed against the solid magic, as if by the sheer force of her love she could break it. Ron put his hand up to hers, the large fingers encompassing them on his side of the wall.

Then Ron turned. Coming face to face with a heard of Inferi.

# Deluminator's Light Ch18

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Chapter 18: Deluminator's Seven Point Light

"It is important to fight and fight again, and keep fighting,  
for only then can evil be kept at bay,  
though never quite eradicated." -Dumbledore

Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince

*That stupid rat was missing again. Harry was sound asleep upstairs, recovering with a full belly and warm sheets from those sodding Dursley's. He couldn't believe they were starving him. Starving him! Those muggles were monsters. He hoped the lot of them rot. It didn't matter though cause now Ron was his family. He wouldn't let the younger kid be alone for another holiday. He wouldn't let those... dunderheads treat him like that. He was sure Hermione felt the same way. Surviving the end of first year together had sealed it for him. No matter what happened, Ron promised himself, he would stick by Harry's side as long as Harry needed him.*

*First though, he needed to find Scabbers. It was late at night and he knew if he let the rat run amok all night then Percy would squabble in his ears about proper pet care tomorrow. Ron checked the kitchen, all the halls, the living room. He knew the rat wasn't in his own room. He'd practically torn the room apart looking for the mangy creature. Harry had been more amused than was rightly proper, if you asked him.*

*" Ronald! What are you doing up so late?"*

*Ron turned to see his mother, her hair soaking wet as she toweled it down, the fresh scent of Peach and honeysuckle. She must of used*

*the special soap Bill bought her for her birthday. Ron smiled sheepishly at her.*

*" I lost Scabbers," he whispered. "Wanted to find him before Percy found out."*

*The edge of his mother's eyes crinkled as she shook her head, a mischievous smile lighting up her features.*

*" That silly, mangy thing," Molly muttered. She pulled him to her, kissing the top of his head. "Best find him then. Percy can be quite insistent when he wants to make a point. Bless his heart. He sometimes forgets that not everything can be controlled and put into a neat little box." Molly chuckled. "Get to bed as soon as you find him though. I'll not keep breakfast warm if your not up to eat it!"*

*" Yes, mum."*

*She headed downstairs, most likely to put out the fireplace before heading up to bed herself. Ron peeked his head into Gin's room before hearing the familiar sound of scuttling feet. Ron's head shot up, turning wildly around until he spotted Scabbers coming out of his parents room. The little beast was looking this way and that, almost as if he were checking to make sure no one was around. He wasn't sure why, but he got a sick feeling in his stomach at the sight.*

*" Scabbers, you mangy ball of fur," Ron snapped, he felt suddenly angry. There was something wrong here, but for the life of him he couldn't put his finger on it. The rat stilled, before scuttling down the hall. In three quick strides he bent down and scooped the rat up. It wasn't until his mum came back up that he knew what was bothering him. She pushed her wet hair out of her face and gave him a rueful smile.*

*" Found him already, did you? Up to bed then. I expect you to show our guest a good time while he's here, you hear me? We have some making up to do for those dreadful relatives of his."*

*"Course, mum," Ron muttered, he waved to her as he headed up the stairs.*

*The rat had been in his mum's room when she was showering. He was just a rat, so it didn't matter. Still, there was this sick feeling in his stomach that said it did. He shoved Scabbers into his cage, locking the rat inside. When he got in bed he made sure to turn his back to the cage, but he couldn't shake the feeling that the rat was staring at his back. It took a long time to fall asleep after that. A few weeks to forget the incident. He was being stupid. Of course, he was. There was no reason he should feel that anything was out of place. It was just a damn rat, after all, nothing more.*

---

Ron turned, coming face to face with a heard of Inferi. A very large group of Inferi.

Be not under the illusion that Ron whipped out his wand and destroyed them with a single fiery spell.

No, when faced with the walking dead, he did what any normal person would do, especially any normal person with no ability to use said wand. Ron shrieked, his back hitting the barrier as they converged on him. With all the grace of a stumbling elephant, Ron took off along the wall, too thin limbs moving faster than they had in seven months' time.

Ducking under tree branches, slamming into outstretching body parts, kicking, tumbling and outright sprinting, ever second was accentuated by a steady, all-encompassing throb of bones. A partially decomposed head rammed into his side. Ron kissed the earth. Jaw snapping shut, rattling his teeth at the clacked together.

He twisted, striking out with a foot. Feet pounding against the ground as he ignored every bodily need, every ache, every spasm. Nothing to motivate someone passed their limits like a set of half there human teeth nipping at your ankles.

The staggering, loping figures around him were slow, but there were so many. This is what the Aurors and Harry and Hermione would be facing when they finally brought the barrier down. Clever, Wormtail, clever. The Aurors would have their hands full containing the threat.

Terrified out of his mind, unable to use magic, Ron still felt relieved in knowing he'd made the right choice. It was a billion times more difficult than he'd imagined, but it had still been the right one.

A hand grabbed at the back of his cloak.

His cloak!

Harry's invisibility cloak!

Ron jabbed his elbow into the face behind him. Taking the cloth's hood into his hands, Ron pulled it fully over himself, disappearing from view. The Inferi staggered into the spot he'd just been, its half disintegrated eyes roaming around in confusion. Head cocking unnaturally to the side as it sniffed the air in befuddlement.

Ron practically collapsed where he was. His lungs fought hard to breath yet he shied away from breathing loud. His quick inhales of breath more like a hummingbird's wingbeat than the deep gasping breaths he desperately wanted... needed to take. He found his back against a tree trunk, keeping the cloak tight around him as the things wandered around, searching for him. Bare boned knuckles dragging along the ground, as if not arms at all, but rags around their shoulders.

The clothes did say one thing though. These Inferi were brand new. Any creatures brought back from the dead tended to have been covered from head to toe in dark magic, skin and bones black as night because they'd been dead for so long. These ones though, there were still signs of flesh, still hair falling in chunks from their skulls. These poor bastards probably hadn't been dead more than a year or so. And considering...



This was a Death Eater prison site. A place where muggleborns and enemies of Voldemort had been dragged. These unrecognizable Inferi had probably been very recognizable citizens, maybe even Hogwarts students, not too long ago. People Ron knew. Had known. Names he'd heard on the radio, a list of the missing and the dead. Hell, Ron might have even seen them murdered. He'd seen a lot of people murdered, after all, it wasn't too far of a stretch to think that some of them ended up here. Ron turned, sliding around outstretched, bony fingers, only partly covered by black magic. The other portions, gaping, leftover signs of humanity.

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Harry Potter cursed Ron Weasley under his breath. Hadn't Harry learned his lesson yet? Hadn't Harry figured his best friend out? How dense did he have to be to continuously be deceived again and again by the redhead? How was he *still* surprised by Ron's actions after all this time?

Harry *never* saw it coming.

But that face always spelled trouble. That stupid, blank, tight fisted look. Since first year when Harry saw it for the first time on the chessboard. To the last time he saw it as Harry screamed at him in the bedroom at the Burrow, screamed until his voice became hoarse and Ron ended up coughing up blood.

Ron was making moves in his head.

Ron's long, emaciated bones leaned against him. He'd felt the drag on Ron's knees, as they buckled the slightest bit, his thighs against Harry's as he fought to stay upright. They should never have taken Ron with them. No matter how much the redhead insisted. Ron was far too sick for this. Far too hurt.

Yet he'd let the git talk him into this.

And Harry hadn't watched him. Harry had *let* Ron stand on his own and *walked away* to talk with a few Aurors. He could kick himself for

this. For not paying attention. For not seeing the blank look spreading across Ron's face as he eyed the Aurors up. With that stupid, too smart for his own good, fucking face.

How had he done it though? Looking like death warmed over and barely standing, how the fuck had he bolted across a field of Aurors and passed through the barriers without anyone stopping him?!

"Ahhhhhhh!" Harry screamed, slashing at the barrier. Hermione had been going at it for ten minutes now alongside the Aurors. There was a desperate fever to her handiwork. One Harry himself had been showing off to. It had barely made a dent though. A few spider web like cracks here and there along the edge.

The Aurors had been impressed.

It had just pissed him and Hermione off though.

Kingsley had wisely chosen to stay on the other end of the spectrum from them. Pale faced and spell working as he organized his men and attacked the barrier.

All the while, Ron's immunity to the shield had probably already gotten him to the castle. He might be inside right now, facing off with the Death Eater with zero ability to perform spell work of any kind. Offensive. Defensive. Nothing.

*' But he has your cloak.'*

The thought warmed him. The idea that he was able to protect Ron in some way. To give the redhead an advantage in this messed up situation. But when he got his hands on the ruddy idiot...

*' I refuse to lose you.'*

Hermione was beside him again. He wasn't sure when she got there, only that the tear tracks had dried, leaving behind furious, glittering brown orbs. Her hand gripped his, the small fingers clasping on like

a steel trap. He nodded, moving closer to her, pointing his wand at the barrier alongside her own.

Harry let the magic build up. All of his anger and love and fear twitching into his fingers, until his wand felt like a withering hot rod. Sparks shot out of his wand. Beside him, a striking blue light dipped in and out of Hermione's own wand. Like an Otter diving in and out of water.

No words were needed.

Their combined spell hitting the barrier was loud enough.

---

Moving between the bodies of the dead far outstretched the horror of ghouls or ghosts, Ron decided, a grotesque assembly of missing limbs, dragging tissue and broken bones. And the moans. A low rumble as he moved between them, some dragging out wet coughs, as if they were still choking, still dying on the blood long since dried in their veins.

Ron backed away from a blackened shoulder, the better part of a stick forced through the burnt flesh to stand awkwardly out like snapped bone. It was slow progress, partly because Ron wasn't sure which direction the large castle like manor was, and partly because exhaustion was an understatement.

At this point Antea's distraction plan might be a twenty step crawling action. The Inferi moved faster and swifter than him and they were dead! Ron pulled himself up and over a steep hill, where he suspected the river once ran before nature changed its course, rolling onto his back and staring with distain at the sky.

Above him an Inferi stuck its nose downwards, its forehead scrunching up as it sought him out, but Ron paid it no mind. Wrapped up in Harry's cloak, the thing wouldn't be able to find him. Enhanced sense, perhaps, but Ron had found on this nightmare hike, that common sense did not come hand in hand. The Inferi

leaned forward and with an almost lazy hand, Ron pushed it so it hit Ron's legs. The thing lurched forward, with a startled grunt, as it went head first over the steep hill.

Limbs like lead, Ron rolled onto his stomach and used shaking arms to get himself half way up, grabbing tree branches and trunks to tug himself the rest of the way. *'Here he is, ladies and gents! The great Ron Weasley come to save the day!'* The joke sent his chest wheezing as he snorted. The wheezing worsened when he realized his inner critic sounded suspiciously like Lee Jorden at his best during quidditch. *'Yes, here he comes, wobbling and gasping like a fish on land, walking straight into a Death Eater hide out, surrounded by Inferi and who knows what else. Ronald Billius Weasley, out classed and out of magic, but not to worry! He's got plenty of stupidity to make up for all that nonsense! Talent? Intelligence? Let's be honest, folks, those things are overrated.'*

Ron leaned his forehead against the trunk of a tree, willing the laugh to die down for fear of truly giving himself away. He wiped the bangs out of his face, feeling how wet his hair was with clammy hands, how hot his forehead seemed. Peering out at the forest, he blinked rapidly, unable to distinguish the bodies of trees from the bodies of the walking dead.

Ron shifted through his bag, pulling out a potion. The glowing blue numbing medication winked up at him. He uncorked it with his mouth, gulping two doses in one long breath. The icy chill rammed itself down his spine, numbing every bone and muscle in his body. It stiffened everything up, making it hard to move, but it would temporarily bring down his growing fever and it would get rid of the ache... for a little while.

He brought the cloak tighter around him, shivering, watching his fogged over breath escape suddenly blue lips. It was with a jolt that he realized the cloak bunched up in front of him. Last year, before he'd been diagnosed with the infection, before he'd been forced to take treatment, he'd worn this cloak. He'd taken it while they'd been in the tent still, trying to get into Hermione's good graces after the

blow out by making trips to the river and hunting fish in secret. Back then the cloak had barely closed around his frame. Six foot six and wide shoulders made him a hulking figure. He'd even had a hard time putting his head on top of Hermione's because of his height and her shortness.

Now though, now it bunched in front of him. Ron's hatred of mirrors had kept him away from seeing the damage done. Every time Harry and Hermione even so much as glanced at him, he saw them flinch. People on the streets looked away. His family stared. Still though, he'd known, but he hadn't really *known*. It was different for him. Being the person who was sick meant feeling himself getting thinner, feeling his throat become raw from vomiting, having to have his teeth repaired from acid, burning up and freezing and throbbing away into nothing. This though, this was a blatant slap in the face of what he was before all this started to what he had become.

Little more than the Inferi wandering around him.

It was as these dark thoughts began to swarm that Ron lost track of where he was going and promptly smacked into a wall. Clutching his face Ron cursed silently, the sound having turned the heads of a few empty eye sockets. He felt the urge to stomp the ground in petulant annoyance, to glare at the wall and declare loud and betrayed: 'Really?!'

Instead he used the wall to guide himself away from where the Inferi crawled. The wall had done him a favor, if he was honest. Self-doubt was dangerous enough, self-pity quickly lead to stupid mistakes. It was all well and good to throw yourself a pity party when things were calm and no one was around, everyone deserved a little of that once and a while, but now was the time to focus on putting on step in front of the other, rather than focusing on just how small those steps had become.

Ron found an entrance to the place. A narrow window set in the second story. The vines crawling along its length were strong, spelled to stretch across the walls so as to look majestic rather than

over crowded. Wizards did enjoy making things look more ancient and pure than they really were.

Climbing up was another matter entirely. The eighteen year old groaned as he gripped the vines trying not to imagine the scuff his sixteen year old self would make at his struggle. Fucking vines. Bloody Wormtail. Stupid Shadow causing stupid infections. He got about half way up the wall when his right arm, the damaged appendix bleeding profusely through bandages, gave up on him entirely. Shaking and twitching, it lay at his sides, refusing to rise no matter how much he physically insisted it should.

How long had it been since he left the group behind the barrier? The first thought was quickly followed by a much more shallow one. What if they stormed the castle and Ron was still just hanging here, having accomplished nothing? Having saved no one? Having just... been fucking useless. Like always.

Ron gritted his teeth, digging his shoes into vines until the tips of his toes scraped against cloth and stone. Drive out the pain. Focus on the task. Keep the magic in check.

It was a funny thing, about magic that is, Ron had never really considered his own magic as a *thing* he could touch. The infection though, the ravaging black magic moving through his bones and muscles, rotting him from the inside out, made him very conscious of the black magic and by extension... his own magic. A small warring little thing inside of him that repelled the dark. The more the infection took hold, the more Ron wanted to grip hold of his own magic, but... the more it took hold the more it hurt to grasp at that ball of light. Like even his own magic resented him.

But, in times like these, when the pain was too much and Ron just wanted to roll over and give up, he could get through it only by focusing on that little warring ball of resentment. If he just... concentrated on it. If he imagined it as an extension of himself, stretching through his limbs, then it made it just the tiniest bit easier to move. To keep going.

So that's what Ron did. Using his long legs to push himself upwards, using his good arm to drag himself up, until his lungs heaved and wrangled his throat with desperate gasping air pockets.

The narrow window was much smaller than Ron thought. A year ago, Ron wouldn't have stood a chance of getting inside. Ron had always been thin, but this opening was fit for defense. Now though... He let a bitter grin hook his lips as he gripped the vine above the window. The wood frame crunched under Ron's boot. The metal knob standing little resistance. He had to slide in one long limb at a time, his ribs, no amount of emancipation making the bones smaller, only barely scraped by.

He made it to the other side, grunting and panting, but through. Inside an almost impenetrable Death Eater prison surrounded by Infer.

*' Not bad Ronald Weasley. Not bad at all,'* Ron thought. *'Now, where are you Antea.'*

---

Just before the War started to get really bad, George and Fred Weasley added a nifty little 'extra' something to their products. A spell coating designed to track everything they sold. Like the Probity Probe they'd given Harry for his birthday, the one tucked safely in the Auror Robes he was wearing at that moment. George couldn't locate Ron, but he could locate Harry. And as long as the spell was in close proximity to one of the siblings, it would take care of the work.

"You lot ready?" George called out to the circle. Fred's light still shown strong in the middle of the Burrows living room. Bill, Charlie, Percy and Ginny's arms outstretched and clasping as George stood in the middle with Fred.

"Get on with it, George!" Charlie snapped.

"Righty oh," George muttered. "All seven points of light have to connect with Ron in order for the spell to be successful. If even one

part of this spell doesn't work..."

"We lose Ron," Ginny finished.

George nodded, face grim.

The tip of his wand lit up, pointed at the deluminator at Fred's feet. Since it was Ron the spell needed to seek, it had to be his object that they focused on. George tuned his magic to the tracker, a small pebble like stone. It glowed. The deluminator came to life once more, lifting until it floated to the center of Fred's chest alongside the stone.

"Alright! Focus on Ron! Focus like you're going to create a patronus only you have to put your full selves into it, Good. Bad. Everything that you love about him. Every memory you can think of!"

So they did.

Bill remembers the night, one of many, Ron came to his room to talk. The confession about Murial, frustration with the twins, all the little hurts and fears stuffed into a young kid with too many siblings and not enough time. Bill remembered the night Ron showed up on his doorstep, the broken left over his brother had stumbled into, like a stranger in his little brothers shoes. Bill brings to the forefront the day Ron showed him his patronus for the first time. The jack russell terrier springing to life and the pride he'd felt as Ron beamed shyly at him.

Charlie pictured in his mind's eye the night he told Ron off about the spiders when they were children. The day so long ago when Ron fell from the tree and broke his leg, how Charlie had performed his first and only accidental magic in fixing it. He remembered the little nuances of his brother's personality. Wearing long sleeves to hide the scars up and down his arm. Casually dismissing all the newspaper articles about himself. Losing his temper over asking his brothers to make tea. Finding Ron with Teddy wrapped in his arms, cuddling up to the giggling infant.



Percy steadied his breath. He could see his brother standing in the background the day he left the house. His shouting match with dad bringing the whole Burrow to a red faced contest of who can scream the loudest. Except Ron. Who doesn't look angry at all. Just betrayed. All the letters Percy wrote, not once getting a reply. He brings it all to the forefront alongside toothless gummy smiles, and small fists clutching at his shirt. The lake where his brother emerged, soaked through, but dragging more than water, dragging the realization that Ron would literally follow Harry to his death. That his little brother would not hesitate for even a second to launch himself after that fool harder young man. The image of Ron, covered in mud, crying his heart out, and clinging to Percy comes to mind. A little would be run away who no one even noticed left. No one but Percy.

Ginny doesn't even need to think hard to which memories she needs for this. Not a second. Maybe they weren't close now, but they had been. When they were little they were really close. And there was this great big ache that she'd been ignoring for a long while now. Ginny brings that up, brings it up along with the need to close it, to make sure that she fixes this, that she has time to fix this. So she brings up fighting with him on the quiddity team and fighting with him as a little girl. She brings up teasing him with Harry during the summers and helping him to bandage up his arms after the Department of Mysteries. She brings up the spell in that cursed place. The one Ron got shot with because he'd taken it for her. Stepping in the way just after her ankle had been cracked. She brings up to the forefront all the times he stood up against George and Fred for her, the only times he stood up to the twins, really, when they were small. Waking up potion meant to give her a good recovery after emerging from the Chamber of secrets to his hand holding hers.

George imagined the letters. The ones that kept him from the ledge. Sometimes just snarky holier than though shit that Ron knew would piss him off. Get him outside. Get him moving. Sometimes stories about Fred, because no one else wanted to mention him, talk about him. They all avoided speaking about his other house, his twin, his

best friend, his brother, his right side of the brain... they avoided it like they avoided him. He remembered the day when he found Ron in tag, the little miscreant dragging him down, making him laugh. He remembers dress robes so terrible that he and Fred had to get him replacements because they felt humiliated for Ron. Because those robes were sort of a slap in the face compared to what he, Fred, and Ginny got to wear. There had been no reason for it. He remembers badly played quidditch and traveling to the castle and hearing Minerva tell them Ron was poisoned. On his coming of age birthday. He remembers the fear of losing him. The decision to create this spell. He brings to mind how much he loves his brother. Never wants to lose another one.

And then the spell expands outwards. A powerful wave of light around the image of Fred as he absorbs all of this, all the memories and more. Then, in a single moment, they are thrown backwards, unconscious.

George is the only one left half awake, hands still gripping Fred.

"I wish it had been me instead," he confesses. "I don't know what to do without you."

"Don't be stupid, Gred," Fred said evenly, a watery smile adorning his face, looking both so unlike him and like him all at once. "You just got to put one foot in front of the other and let those troublesome family members of ours do what they do best; worry. You let them worry and fret and bother you until it gets a little bit easier. And you have sex. Lots and lots of sex. That it make it better."

George laughed.

He laughed even as his eyes began to roll into the back of his head and light gently guided him to the ground. And if the last image George saw that night was of Fred's form, made of light, with what appeared to be tears gliding down his face, then George would refrain from saying anything. Because Fred would rather have it that way.

And then Fred disappeared, gliding out the window with the deluminator, memories, and tracker in his core.

---

Antea hung by her wrists, suspended by magic bounds four or five feet off the ground. For a brief moment Ron thought it was a corpse that hung there, but then her head tilted of her own accord, a grimace of pain flashing along her brow before her face was hidden from him.

Ron moved slowly into the room, keeping Harry's cloak around him like a second skin. Wormtail was nowhere in view. Ron raised his wand, urging his volatile magic to release just a smidgen of magic, just enough to come to the surface and do his wishes. It squirmed under his demand, yanking at his pull, half-heartedly it seemed, as if it too were too tired to fight.

The spell shot out. A scream wrenched itself from Ron's throat and he found his legs buckling under the strain. His bones seared, burning beneath his veins, tearing at his muscles. He gaged, acid and spit sliding down his chin. *'Not fun, Holy mother of Godric, that was not fun.'*

"Ron?" Antea's voice croaked.

It was rougher than he'd ever heard it. Ron blinked her figure into focus, scowling at the air beneath her feet. It had not effect. His spell had failed miserably. The magical bounds didn't even look as if they'd loosened.

"Et's me," Ron slurred, " 'tay quiet."

Standing shakily, Ron glanced around. No footsteps sounded down the hall. Wormtail was most likely guarding the entrances. He wouldn't suspect Ron had gotten through otherwise. The room itself was sparse, holding only a large table, chairs, and some portraits. The table would have been the easiest to use, as the thing stood a good four feet off the ground, but it was typical overzealous pure-

blood fanatic design. Larger than necessary and made of heavy arse marble.

*' Couldn't be a poor family with cheap wood, nooooo, too much to ask for, '* Ron grumbled to himself.

"Keep a lookout," Ron whispered.

Antea nodded. Straining to lift her head so that her eyes kept watch over the entrance. One way in and one way out. No doubt Wormtail had chosen it to ensure if Ron did get passed him then he wouldn't be able to leave without a confrontation. Still, it all didn't sit well with him, this man, whoever he was, was a hell of a lot smarter than Wormtail had ever been. And *that* made him nervous.

Dragging the chair over to Antea, Ron had to marvel at how terrible an idea this was. The synonym for 'not subtle.' It reminded him of their first escapades at Hogwarts. Choosing to sneak out of the tower before putting Harry's cloak around them in first year. Only now it wouldn't be sweet Neville Longbottom catching them in the act, but Wormtail. There would be no fists raised half-heartedly, but a deadly wand. And Wormtail wouldn't call out to him. Ron probably wouldn't even hear the wand being drawn.

He stood on the legs of the chair, his balance precarious, but his height managing to give him enough leverage that he could easily get to Antea's hands. His lanky frame leaned against Antea's chest, his fingers were hard fought to get his wand into her bound fingers. Her head rested on his shoulder, eyes intent on the entrance.

"My magic's shite right now 'cause of the infection. I can't free you by myself. I'm gonna hold the wand up and you cast the spell, k? Then we'll scam on out of here like Slytherine cowards, yeah? Screaming like little girls and all."

Antea would have laughed. It would have been loud and obnoxious... a little like a donkeys, but now there was only the up-turn of lips against his ear, whispering in a thick French accent.

"Before anything else, I'm going to rip your vocal cords straight out of your throat, blood traitor."

Ron froze. His fumbling fingers held tight in place by hands larger and thicker than his own, much larger still than Antea's. The French accent then alighted with a hex.

"Fulguratio!"

Ron didn't stand a chance. His body hit the ground, a cold hard 'smack,' convulsing on the ground. Limbs falling into a spasm, electricity lining his skin, the smell of burning flesh hitting his nostrils. He blacked out.

When he came to moments later, it was to the sight of Antea half transfigured; her dark skin pale in patches, bubbling in white spurts, head balding, her warm brown eyes narrowing into two black beads focused solely on Ron. He hadn't noticed it before, in his panic to get Antea down, but there was a scent of vanilla in the air, trailing the person's steps as it circled him.

"Polyjuice Potion," Ron rasped, his words came out as a hiss.

The figure bent down, quickly shortening fingers caressing his cheek. He jerked away, but his limbs couldn't get him far enough, they scrambled in the wrong direction, half numb.

" Do you understand me, Weasley? "

"Understand what?" Ron growled, weary as he eyed the forming man.

" Good to see the lessons sunk in ."

Ron blinked in confusion, before understanding lit his eyes. He hadn't noticed at first. The words the man was speaking flowed differently. He knew what they were, but...

"You're speaking French."

This seemed to amuse the man more than anything. He paused in his step, eyeing Ron with consideration.

"You didn't realize at all? Perhaps it's part of the spell work. The words are meant to assimilate. I just didn't think they would do so with such success." the man shrugged.

"What are you talking about?"

The doppelganger lifted Ron's chin with the tip of his wand, when Ron raised his hand to push him away, it was jabbed threateningly there. He stilled, staring him in the eye.

"The experiment, my boy, the experiment."

Ron stayed silent. He wasn't sure before, but now he was. This man, the man wearing Wormtail's skin, really did believe he remembered everything. And if it wasn't him or the Death Eaters in this place who took his memories, then who? Who the hell would care if he remembered being tortured? Who would wipe his mind of it all? Of Abigail and Mary Salen and the things that happened here?

More than that though, he dreaded his own suspicions. What if he hadn't been brave enough to face all of this? What if he'd wiped his own memories? It would mean he endangered Harry and Hermione *willingly*. By withholding the information he withheld the knowledge that he'd told the Death Eaters Harry was staying low in a tent somewhere. That gave the Death Eaters a much better idea of where Harry might be. How to seek him out. He couldn't imagine doing that without at least writing something down, giving himself a message to deliver to Harry. Something vital like this, Ron couldn't contemplate why he would leave himself out of the loop, not even if he was devastated or suicidal. Even if he'd planned on taking his own life, Ron would never do so without leaving Harry a message.

He was confident in himself enough for that at least.

Wormtail sighed, well, his body sighed. The person inside Wormtail. And there was yet another mystery. Was it possible to polyjuice twice? A combination of hair, or taking one after the other? Though potion class lent to the idea that one would just become a mixed monster rather than any individual person. But as far as Ron knew there was no spell to give someone another person's looks. Glamor charms only did so much and there was none that Ron knew that lasted so long.

"Where is Antea?" Ron demanded.

The wand traced his jawbone, the man seemingly distracted by what he found there, when the man shrugged, it caused his whole body to move with the action. The man's eyes raked over him, almost casually, as if they were standing amidst a library discussing transfiguration, rather than in a Death Eater prison discussing torture and experimentation. Ron jerked away as much as he could, but the lingering electrical feel left him fumbling the attempt. Apparently satisfied, he spoke once more, but in English.

"Probably dead," the doppelganger smiled with his teeth, displaying the oddly large front teeth with far more confidence and ease than the real Wormtail had ever demonstrated. "She wasn't much of a lady. I locked her outside with the Inferi hours ago. Far more fit for their company than my own."

If Remus were still alive, Ron would keep this man alive until the full moon, before locking the bastard inside the sealed chamber designed by Tonks. And then Ron would park his happy arse outside that chamber and just listen... for the rest of the night. Until there was nothing left to listen to. And if there was anything left, he'd flay it at dawn. So that Remus wouldn't have to feel guilty about doing a good deed, as the man was want to.

"My wife would adore you," Wormtail said thoughtfully. "So much fight even when you have nothing."

Noise from outside began to filter in. Or, not so much filter, as it became so loud that it overwhelmed the walls meant to keep it out. They'd broken through. Harry and Hermione were fighting the Inperi. He needed to stall. Needed to keep this up until they got here.

"So you and your wife enjoy torturing people then?" Ron asked.

"No, no, not so much. She doesn't have an eye for torture. She does like to break her toys in though, likes them malleable to her will, you see, and some might argue that it's one and the same, but I think one takes a bit more finesse and intelligence to master."

"That's pretty fucking sick," Ron growled.

"Perhaps in England, but France would have been much more receptive to the ideals the Dark Lord sought to incorporate into law. You," Wormtail dug his wand into Ron's chest, the tip stabbing between his ribs, a fond, loving sort of twist to his mouth forming as he talked about his wife, "... after the ceremony, if you'd survived the final portion of the ritual, I'd planned to use the Servus en saeculum on you. My wife would have been tickled pink to have such a handsome young man in her household."

His stomach flipped, feeling his limbs twitch beneath him with renewed feeling, he dragged himself as far away from the man as possible. He recognized the spell from A History of Magic. The same one originally used on the House Elves far back in the day.

"You'd enslave a human being?" Ron breathed, he couldn't quite believe it, couldn't keep the startled noise from his voice.

"Well, it's much better use of you than just killing you off, wouldn't you say?"

The line struck Ron as familiar. He'd heard those words before. In this very place.



"The muggleborns," Ron murmured. "Enslaving muggleborns. Using them as soldiers, but... the spells were duds." The words spilled out, and though he couldn't remember them, they leached onto his mind as truth.

"Yes, well, as you saw the first time we were in this miserable place... they wouldn't exactly have such a dark spell in children's textbooks, would they? No, it was a name holder, the true spell doesn't work so well on wizards, even ones such barbaric, disgusting mudbloods. It works fine on muggles though. It would have been a lovely challenge to try it on bloodtraitors, but considering the results of my experiments, I might have had to rely on lesser spells."

Ron found his back to a wall, something metal slamming onto the ground beside him as he pushed himself up. A slab of metal with a family crest carved into its center, shining silver; a shield. A sad note entered Wormtail's eyes as he leveled his wand at Ron.

"And that's why we're here, isn't it?"

"You know too much. The only person alive, in fact, who knows everything. Well, besides Spinsor, of course, but he and I are even now."

"You released him from prison."

"A fair price for the reeking pit of a man to keep his trap shut, no?"

Wormtail raised his wand.

"Inflari!"

Ron dove to the side, bringing the shield up. The spell crashed against it, slamming Ron against the wall. The metal bubble and expanded outwards, swelling outwards. Hidden behind the growing abomination, Ron tucked Harry's cloak around him, disappearing from view.

"Always so resourceful," Wormtail crooned. "But you deal with one who possesses much more experience than a tender eighteen year old has to offer."

Ron edged away from the door, knowing any spells would be directed at the only opening. He was caught off guard though, when Wormtail pointed to the ceiling.

"Tempus Verum procella!"

A whining sound filled the room. Twisting metal. A whistle noise, like pipes releasing high pressure, no, exactly that. The walls around them began to soak through with water. One of the five laws dictated you couldn't create water, but you could sure as hell summon it. Water began to drip down then fall in torrents. He took a step back, but cringed as his footstep made a ripple. Ron hunkered down, now knowing what the man's game was. If he moved, the doppelganger would know exactly where he was.

"That... is beyond a normal wizarding cloak," Wormtail muttered. "It far outstretches any invisibility charms I've ever been lucky enough to come across."

The man stood before the entrance, his beady eyes searching the water for even the faintest display of movement. But if there was one thing Ron had learned in the last seven months, it was to stay still. Don't breathe. Don't twitch. Any movement in any direction could be the wound you wake up with is an inch longer. The spell work for cutting out the infection needed to be precise, he couldn't sleep through it, had to be conscious.

So that's what Ron did. He kept still. Didn't breathe. Didn't twitch. No ripples stretched outward from his person. Even his heart seemed to pause, as if it too understood that if it moved too fast, it would never beat again. No wand. No magic. Nowhere to run.

The doppelganger had outsmarted him. He cursed himself for that. He should have asked Antea a question. Should have verified who

she was, but... it had been so easy to accept. The idea that it was her, that they would escape, because they always had, hadn't they? No matter how awful the circumstances, they always got out in the end. The Order got them out of the Department of Mysteries though. Harry got them out of the Ministry though. Hermione scrounged up there escape from Gringotts. Dobby got them out of Malfoy Manor. None of that was him. Ron had never managed to escape anything. Well, except for the tent...

No, no time for those type of thoughts.

Think. Think. THINK!

He could wait him out. Guessing from the pacing the man was doing, that wasn't really an option though. He was gonna start shooting spells at random and there was only so long Ron could avoid that.

All of the escapes, Ron had to have learned something. Wormtail. Ron closed his eyes, picturing the man clawing at his own throat as the silver claw tightened there. Could it work again? This man was a great deal more intelligent than Wormtail, but... He pictured Wormtail, looking at them through the bars of the prison cell, Wormtail groveling at Sirius and Remus's feet, the whistling, wheezing sound of his voice. The way Wormtail tended to drag out the last word, stalling as the cowardly man sought to appease.

"You've lost already," Ron threw across the room, keeping his voice as close to Wormtail's as possible.

The fake jumped, wand shooting off a spell at the other corner.

"There cominnnnnnng for youuuuuu," Ron let the words drag out, just a little from where he originally threw them.

Wormtail shot off two more spells. Chunk of stone hitting water, sending ripples all over the room. Ron used the distraction, moving a few steps closer while the man's eyes were focused elsewhere.

"You ruined everythinnnng."

Wormtail's voice reverberated around the room.

"Enough!" The French man shouted. "Spermatophyta!"

Ron found himself stopped mid-step, one foot frozen to the floor as all the water iced over within seconds. The French man turned straight towards Ron. There was no confusion on his face at all, he could see Ron, even with the cloak still pulled firmly around his body.

"Your cloak has frozen over, Mr. Weasley, frost covers every inch of it. I imagine it was soaked when I first performed the spells, yes? Curious that it would keep you concealed when soaked, but not when the water between its stitches, freezes. I have to admit to being very impressed, young one. That is a nifty trick you have there. You mimicked him perfectly."

Ron cleared his throat and in a clear, thick French accent told him.

"Fuck off."

Far from being surprised the man only looked more impressed, grinning in delight.

"How long do you have to listen to the... never mind, never mind. Must not let my curiosity get the best of me. No more distractions, my boy, no more of your cleverness. Let us, finally, be done with it all."

Ron tugged at the ice, but he was stuck firm. He flinched as he recognized the green flow at the tip of French man's wand. At least he'd had time to say goodbye. He'd written his letters. He'd said everything he needed to say in them. Just in case. Ron tugged the hood down, staring his murderer in the eyes.

"Harry will find you first," Ron told him plainly. "They won't even be able to locate your bones when he's through with you."

"Funny," the French man said loftily, "you've made that threat before and no one came at all."

The green light came at him at the same moment the building exploded.

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As it turns out, spells meant to topple giants worked fantastic wonders on Inferi, but left gaping holes in the landscape. Hermione used it with reckless abandon, adding in a variety to curses and threats her boyfriend would be mightily impressed by and the victim of as soon as she located him. Never before had she suffered a more intolerable few hours of her life. The moment the barrier came down, her feet had hit the ground, the Inferi receiving the full brunt of her wrath.

In the early period of their wait Harry ' *confiscated* ' a broom from one of the Aurors. Above Hermione's head, she could see him using a barrier shield quite effectively as a battering ram. Sweeping through the fields of body parts, the sharp turns and rapid accelerations over the fields leaving her breathless and hopeful with each false pause. Their renegade knight was screwed. Doomed to be a couch potatoes for the rest of his ever loving life when they got their hands on him. As far as Hermione was concerned, Ron had lost every right to leaving their sights for the rest of his miserable life.

In the distance, Kingsley and his Aurors swept the grounds, performing their share of the battle, of course, but the contribution was negligible in comparison. At the end of the day, it mattered very little who took care of what, but rather, how quickly the battle outside of the Castle was handled.

At least, Head Auror Williams made sure to note so in the debrief report much later that day, his secretary was less than impressed when asked to file it. She was further annoyed by the accusatory tones William took when remarking upon one Hermione Granger, 'deranged and reckless wither her spells,' destroying and destabilizing the west side of the building with a single wayward hex.

Said Secretary, one Parvati Patil would forward it the next morning to the secretarial assistant of the Healing War Veterans Program, also known as Neville Longbottom who she trusted to keep in handy in case it was ever *needed* .

Back on the battlefield, several hours before these passing events, one Ronald Weasley and one Wormtail Doppelganger, resided precariously close to the West Wing. The two enemies found themselves propelled through the air in a gale of stone, debris, and dust. One was flung against a wall where they crumbled, unconscious and unaware, to awaken soon after. The other, tossed carelessly out the entranceway, head striking the floor with enough force to concuss, but not quite enough to incapacitate. But also with a single thought running through his head as he hit: the killing curse was much louder and hurt a great deal more than he expected it too. Rather, he imagined dying would be a lot less... dramatic.

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"What the fuc... Am I dead?" Ron slurred, face planted against the floor. Head throbbing. Body... well to be honest, the same as it has been for a while. Ringing sounded through his head and though he could see large chunks of rock and stone crashing onto the ground not too far from his spot, he could hear none of it.

Ron dragged himself further from the room. Getting as far from the French man as possible, and the falling debris, but really, Ron would choose the latter any day of the week. Now that he was out of there, he needed to find... something. Yes, he needed to find something and get out of there. Ron blinked hard, trying to figure out what it was. A jacket, right? He needed to find his maroon hoodie. No, no, it wasn't a thing. It was a who. Antea. He needed to get outside and find Antea.

It was in the midst of this confused state that something very familiar happened. Ron's arm lit up. His fuzzy mind automatically reached down for his bag. It was the purple potion. Late afternoon dosage; slowed the infection. Plus the puke tasting green one; the one that kept tumors from forming. Like the one Hermione thought was the

problem to this whole mess, the Bezoar leaking poison through his body. But she didn't know. Ron hadn't told her. The Bezoar had already been recognized as a tumor inside his body. He'd *already* had it removed. Silly, good hearted Hermione, jeez, the floor was not that close a moment ago.

His fingers found the pocket of the bag, he shoved them inside, expecting to find the glass potion bottle matching his lit up arm. Instead, he the sharp sting of broken glass slashed at his fingertips. He snatched them back, coming away with mixed potions and blood.

Alarmed Ron yanked the strap off, rolling away from the melting bag. Something hot touched his thighs. It was burning him! Ron bucked, pulling at his pants to get them off, the acid of god knows what eating through the layers as if they were paper napkins. Ron hissed as a few drops buried themselves into his skin, his flesh sizzled, blood seeping out. Finally, he got them off, tossing the cloth away from himself, leaving Ron in his boxers, oversized blue hoodie, and Harry's cloak.

Harry's cloak with fist size hole in it.

*' Deal with it later, at least it's not a hole inside you, eh?'*

The building shuddered. The window across from him cracked. The assault outside still going strong.

*' You need to get up, get going,'* Ron hissed at his body.

His body promptly flipped him off.

*' Fair enough, but this is kinda vital, pal.'*

His body shuddered to its feet. Ron managed two more hallways before it gave out on him. He was surprised he'd made it this far. His organs were fighting to function without his potions. Faithfully taking them every day for so long at the exact same time sort of had that effect. His bones were tired and he was tired.

"Sorry," Ron rasped to the walls. Maybe they were magical, like Hogwarts, and could somehow transport his message to the right people. To Harry and Hermione. "So sorry, I'm always fucking shit up."

Blood dribbled down his chin. There was a trail, he knew, from his arms and legs. Red, half-smeared blood where he'd roused his mangy body along the way. A god damn arrow pointing to his location for Wormtail (whatever the fuckers real name was) to follow. No need to try hard, sir, right this way, sir, blood traitor ahead!

Ron chuckled, because *that* was kind of funny. The blood traitor betrayed by his own blood. He should tell that joke to someone. Not Percy, obviously, Percy wouldn't think it was funny. It would probably make Percy sad.

He bunched up the cloak to himself, wondering what Harry would think when he found his body wrapped up in his father's sole gift. And he'd gotten a hole in it. In Harry's family heirloom. What an asshole move. If he tried *really* hard he could probably take it off. Set it to the side. Away from the blood he was getting on it. He was so tired though. He just wanted to sleep. He breathed in the cloak, the comforting smell of his best friend prevalent to the end, apple spice with a sharp scent of olive oil. Harry liked to use olive oil in his cooking a lot. They'd play quidditch after dinner, the oil soaking into the wood of Harry's broom.

Hermione always had a musty smell. Old books, Ron knew, it lingered on her long after she finished with whatever it was she was reading. She tried to cover it up with perfume, but it only mixed. It made her smell like old books and flowers. Always different kinds. She liked to change it up, but it was always best right after a shower, because it was all her. Just soap and some sort of green tea, jasmine scent she rinsed with.

He'd do absolutely anything to have one or both of them right now. He felt his eyelids sagging. Felt himself fading away. This was good.



Hopefully nothing else would explode. That would suck. He just wanted... to leave peaceful like, if he had to go. Ron closed his eyes.

"Don't you dare!" a voice roared. Ron found himself bundled up in warm, strong light. Dragon handler arms around his thin frame.

"Charlie?"

Charlie glowed, his large form solid, yet wispy like a patronus. The light though, Ron would recognize it anywhere, it was special, thicker than any other form of light; the deluminator. The Charlie patronus had his hand over Ron's heart, the large palm covering it up completely. His smile was big and welcoming, like every morning he woke up with the giant over his bed, telling him to greet the day. A protective, defiant light exuding from his being.

"We're coming for you, Ron. I'm not going to let you face anymore monsters by yourself, not spiders or Death Eaters, or anything else out there. We're going to go home and we'll face everything together," Charlie rambled, his deep voice oddly echoing.

Ron curled into his brother, laying his head down in his lap. There was a jerking sensation deep inside of him. It hurt. As if someone were stroking his organs with their bare hands. If he wasn't already mostly dead, it would have probably made him scream. Now though, only a small, pitiful moan escaped.

"You won't die, Ron. We're all outside, fighting to get in here. Taking those monsters down, so don't you dare let your monster get to you before we do, ya hear?"

Charlie shook him, but his brother was fading. Already Ron could feel his head sinking into the light figure. Ron grabbed at it, oddly enough, feeling stronger the lighter Charlie became.

"Don't go," Ron rasped, his breathing was coming easier.

As the last of Charlie faded two things occurred. The first, a small piece of wood, one sixth of a piece of old wand, disintegrated into nothing. The second, more significant event, was that Ron Weasley toppled over, convulsing on the floor, one sixth of his memories returned in an instant.

Convulsing, shuddering, gripping his skull, Ron came to. The light provided was little, but it seared his brain as if the sun itself hovered above him. The past and present clashed against one another as they assimilated.

He was just lying there, surrounded by a crumbling building, yet at the same time, he felt... saw, experienced himself being dragged down the hall by Dolohov. He lay there and yet he fought back as Dolohov slammed his fist into the side of Ron's face, repeatedly. He could feel the dust and shudder of the building beneath his back and at the same time felt his younger self, the way his feet kicked out, intertwining with Dolohov's. A scramble for the wand in Dolohov's hand. Losing. Bring knocked out.

And suddenly... Ron knew exactly what the experiment was Press talked about. He knew who the Inferi outside were; muggleborns. Muggleborns experimented on and when the spells failed to produce results, they were thrown into the pits out back. Killed off one after another with no mercy. Ron was part of the experiments; a couple of them. Press didn't enjoy torture, only the extension of knowledge, and he wasn't afraid to get his hands a little bloody if it meant furthering his understanding of the world. Of magic and order. THE order. The right order as Press's Lord defined it. As Voldemort defined it. And a plan.

With his new found strength, Ron staggered to his feet, coming face to face with Percy. He nearly shrieked, but managed to contain it to the smallest of disapproving glances. His brother's light emitted sadness, a humbled understanding empathy. Ron leaned into his older brother, soaking in the love offered there.

"Oh Ron," Percy breathed, diving forward to support him, steadying the wiry build that was Ron with well-meaning arms. "I don't supposed Charlie remember to tell you what's going on?" Ron snorted and Percy sighed. "Your memories were locked away inside of the deluminator. Fred and George cast a spell that drew magic from each of us, steadily over a period of time. The magic is a special sort of healing. It will pull the hocrux... the shadow out of your body. But you're too weak to do it all at once. It would kill you. It hurts more this way, but it is necessary. Each piece of our magic is going to pull the shadow closer to the surface. Because your memories were locked in one of the charms incased in Fred and George's spell, your memories will come back slowly with each piece of Fred and George's spell."

"Sounds horrible," Ron grimaced.

Percy nodded. He was already fading, Ron could see the small piece of Fred's wand in his chest.

"It's going to hurt a lot, and you might not feel strong enough to deal with it right now, but we're running out of time. The spell activated for a reason, Ronnie, the shadow is trying to take you."

Percy's explanation was cut off as the man disappeared completely. Ron would have chuckled if vertigo didn't decide it was a bad thing at the moment. He found himself clutching the wall, the convulsing threatening to send him to the floor again. He clutched at his chest, mouth gapping open as he tried to breathe. It no longer felt as if the person was stroking his organs, but more like they were digging their nails into them.

Somehow, miracle upon miracles (or horror upon horrors, Ron couldn't tell), he'd managed to stay upright. The memories loosened again. His world crashing between two existences. Two mindsets clashed. The here and now slipping into the then and there until he couldn't quite figure out what the hell he was doing there. Until Antea slid herself neatly into a box on a shelf in the back of his mind

between two romantically involved emotions called 'confusion' and 'pain.'

He felt a sudden need to itch his wrists, to bring them to his person. To bring someone to his person. Where was his jacket? Where was she? Ron felt blood drip down the back of his neck. No... down his wrists. His fingers felt the skin along his two wrists, but there was nothing but smooth skin, even the scarred remnants of the brain and his treatment running soft beneath the top of his knuckles. He felt his neck and yes, it had been the back of his head, it was there, red. He saw blood. Red, red, iron smelling, red blood, spilling everywhere. A bloody circle of bright, flickering lights. His body seized as images assaulted him.

Two cells directly across from one another.

An empty train.

Hands outstretched across stone.

Drains full of blood.

Vanilla candles.

A muggle man with hazel eyes and a kind, reassuring smile.

A lion eating a snake.

Crying.

Sobbing.

SCREAMING.

Dying.

He was dying. No, everyone was dying. Where was his jacket? Where was his FUCKING jacket? Ron looked around frantically for it.

But no jacket of any sort lay in the halls. Because it wasn't in a hall. It was in a bathroom. Where was the bathroom in this place?

Ron walked forward, finding rooms that whimpered and others that bled, but no bathrooms with jackets. He frowned, his head throbbing, pulsing. He rubbed at it, before staring up at dust coming down from the ceiling.

"You're hurting."

His head snapped up at the sound. Rose stood there. Except, she wasn't Rose at all, she was Abigail. Her big brown eyes staring at him in fright. Her arms outstretched as if to help him. He shuddered. His mouth opened up to say something, to reach back, to reassure her that he was okay. His temple stopped him, he screamed, feeling his skull trying to rip itself apart.

"And you're cold."

Ron felt his knees buckle under him. Felt his whole being weaken under the child's steady gaze. She was wearing clothes he'd never seen her wear before though. They were not the hospital gown, nor were they her school clothes. It was... a ragged blue hoodie. His hand tightened around his own blue hoodie under the cloak. The one he'd randomly bought one afternoon shopping with Hermione for Harry's gift, even though he'd never owned anything blue in his life.

"You're not here," Ron whispered to himself. "You're not here. You're not real. This isn't real." He shook himself back and forth, trying to pull his mind back under order.

The image of Rose knelt down.

"Will you talk in your snakey voice again?" She whispered softly, eyes alight in mischief.

He closed his eyes to her. His body jerked. Images came to the back of his eyelids, a man outside of a cell... large like a troll. A crooked

smile of yellow teeth. Large boots walking the length of the cell before casting a spell, summoning a snake.

Spinsor.

Spinsor held a tool in his hand, the blades poised on either side of Ron's fingers. He was demanding where Harry was. Ron was screaming that he didn't know. He was cringing, spitting, fighting, crying, screaming!

No.

He was alone.

No more memories. He didn't want anymore. Make it stop. Make it *all* stop! Westerfield had him on the ground, straddling him, the man's wand was pointed at Ron's heart. He withered on the ground of the prison cell. There was screaming, it wasn't Ron's screams though. He couldn't. His heart was being stopped. Started. Stopped. Started. Repeatedly. As a *game*. Not for torture, for amusement, for that fuckers amusement.

It hurt.

It hurt so bad.

Ron was rocking back and forth. His face was soaked. He was sobbing. It wasn't just his tears though. Someone above him was crying too. Ron didn't trust them though, hadn't for a long time. He wanted to push them away. He didn't want anyone touching him. Not now. He was better off dead. No more memories. Please no more. The arms refused to listen to his thoughts though. They hugged him tight and unyielding.

The body of light above him thrummed with love and hurt. It was like a tidal wave, overwhelming and comforting all in one. So much emotions in such a small figure. So much, in fact, that the figure didn't know what to do with it all, only knew how to hold on.

"I'm sorry. I'm so, so, sorry."

"Hi Gin," Ron croaked.

Her hair fell over his face, and despite the strands being made of light, they still tickled his face. Her trembling lips touched his forehead as she rocked them back and forth. She pulled him fully against her, so that she leaned against the wall and Ron's head fell on her shoulder.

"I don't want anymore," Ron begged.

Ginny only cried harder though, shaking her head as she began to fade.

"We've only got one chance to save you," Ginny whispered. "I'm so sorry, Ronnie. I love you."

Ron curled into himself, prepared for the next onslaught. It hit him hard. The shadow was more sentient than Ron had ever felt. No longer just a figure in the mirror or an infection in his bones, Ron felt it stirring inside of him. It was a mirror image, when it jerked, Ron jerked. Ginny was fading fast, her petite hand over his heart, she felt it too. Her big brown eyes wide and terrified as Ron jerked again. He felt his eyes rolling into the back of his head.

He was inside a subway car.

Inside a cell.

Inside a shop.

They were making plans; the Death Eaters, but so were they. The three of them. Ron, Mary Salen, and little Abigail. Abigail Moscate. Mary Salen had been illegally creating port keys for muggle borns and half-bloods. Her own emergency port key had been stolen by a desperate father trying to get his children out of the country.

Down in the dingy cells she was teaching him. It didn't matter which of them managed it, one of them needed to get a wand, and both of them needed to be prepared to create an escape port key. They didn't have a chance otherwise. The anti-apparition wards, dementor's, and Inferi made it impossible to escape without one, especially when the escapees including a heavily pregnant woman and an eight year old child who couldn't use magic at all. Every spare moment mattered. It was the hardest lessons Ron ever had to endure. Never would he ever curse his textbooks again. There were so many rules to memories. So many instructions. One small thing wrong and the person wouldn't go anywhere or they'd end up on the other end dead. They wouldn't get a second chance, might not get a first.

Ron's body stilled. More energy than Ron could remember having in months filled him. He searched for a window, finding one and using the landscape to situated himself. He knew the buildings layout now. Had nearly half his memories back. He was on the third floor, near the ball room, but more importantly near the kitchens.

With a limping gate, Ron navigated his way through the old castle, taking turns with confidence. Mary had nearly escaped this way. Would have managed it to if not for the nine month baby bump she'd been sporting.

George met him there, the deluminator's thick light hallowed out in a way Ron found hard to describe. Devastation overwhelmed the figure. There was a cold, harsh edge to the figure before him, but there was also a hint of mischief, unshakable loyalty, and depthless love.

The grip George held him with was firm. The hug he pulled him into even more so. The stubby hands reminded him of Charlie, but the way they strayed over his heart, as if the fingers were afraid to damage him just as much as they urged to protect him, that was all George. The softer edge of the blade that was the Weasley twins. His older brother pulsed with such fear and resilience, Ron wasn't sure if he felt compelled more to pull away or tighten his hold on him.



"We considered the idea it could happen to any of you, but we began the spell work with you in mind. We figured out of everybody..." George trailed off, his voice softer than Ron had ever heard it. "We'll we were hoping we were wrong. Just this once. I never expected, you know, that if we were to die, it would only be one of us. I originally designed this spell with the idea that if Fred and I died... I never thought it would be just Fred or just me. We started work double time after your seventeenth birthday. Between you and Bill..."

George pulled away slightly, so that he could face Ron, look him in the eye. They could both feel the shadow fighting against Ron. Feel it snarl as it was forced up and out of the bones. Ron shuddered against George.

"You are not going to end up like Fred." The declaration was made so fiercely, Ron felt his spine straightening under the words, as if George had commanded it. "I will not lose you."

But Ron lost George in the next second. Lost his hand hold too. The memories clawing at him with the same terrifying strength the shadow possessed. It stripped him of his balance. Godric. Ron had let a few things slip. He hadn't been strong enough to withhold all the information. A new wealth of guilt pooled into his stomach, filling the empty organ with a new palate to digest. Betrayals he hadn't known he'd done.

He promised Abigail a family.

He swore to get them out.

He promised Mary Salen he would take care of her daughter.

He hadn't stopped the Death Eaters in time.

It was shorter this time, but it left him just as disorientated. He found himself looking for the hoodie again. Twisting around in unease as he searched in a manic, desperate fashion for the maroon hoodie. It wasn't there though and it sent a chill of fear through him.

Clapping drew his attention.

The image of a well-dressed French man sprung to mind. Slim figured and impeccably groomed with side burns the Irish would kill for. But then the image overlapped with reality. A pot-bellied mess of a man, rumped and filthy and wearing the skin of a man long since dead. The ill fitted suite and slicked back hair a poor attempt to retain his old body image.

"Press," Ron acknowledged, not dancing around that he didn't know the truth, didn't know why he was being dragged here, or why Antea had been kidnapped. Ron knew. The facts shuffled in his head, not quite settled, not quite in chronological order, and not even whole, but mostly there.

Press was a hell of a lot scarier than Wormtail could ever hope to be, not nearly as bad as Westerfield or Dolohov, but bad enough that it sickened Ron to know that he'd been in the room with the man and hadn't *known*. He hadn't understood the game being played, didn't know anything outside of a few pounds and that he was on the chess board.

"How's the new skin working out for you?" Ron asked, the French words coming out easily, like riding a broom after a few months of not riding at all, though his rasping voice caused inappropriate inflections.

"Terribly," Press answered back, "You see, two dreadful little boys ruined everything for me. One killed the Dark Lord and the other stole the half-blood new born I needed."

"Ruling over France is a bit of an old fashioned idea, isn't it? I always thought you kept up with the trends."

"It's an old idea," Press sighed.

"Taking over countries is so last year. Now going to jail," Ron shrugged, "that's all the rage."

Press drew his wand, his eyes never leaving Ron for a second.

" You seem decidedly better than my last bout of consciousness," Press noted. " Always full of surprises. "

Ron switched back to English, moving backwards as he spoke.

"Surprise. Dumb Luck. Stubborn Siblings. Take your pick. I've given up trying to explain anything about my life."

His fingers pressed against the House Elf door, fumbling with tiny clasp keeping him from entering.

"Whatever it may be, you've been a thorn in my side for far too long."

Press made a slashing motion with his wand. Recognizing the Half-Blood Prince's wand movement, he threw up his arms. His chest did not rip open though. A thud and an unhappy sound replaced the noise of tearing flesh. An angry coiled beast of righteous anger stood overshadowing Ron. The figure of Bill Weasley, chest heaving, eyes alight with more than deluminator or magic, stood before him. An unmovable force of protective papa bear syndrome overflowing the air. Though he couldn't see it, Ron was sure Bill's nostrils were flaring, causing the scars along his face to tighten.

One hand, palm flat against Ron's heart, the other facing in Press's direction. While Percy had been stretched into a wiry thin frame, Bill was built like Ron, broad shouldered and tall as a skyscraper. All of that stood before Ron like a wall. And unlike Ron's other siblings, Bill didn't say a word, mostly because he didn't need to.

Ron felt the Shadow loosen its hold on his muscles, the thing's grip still strong around his veins and skin though. It was just under the surface now. An angry beast of dark magic. It had been unwedged from his marrow, leaving its rot behind, but taking with it the death sentence. Ron could sense the Shadow's terror, and Bill's vicious, triumphant grip as his magic surged inside of Ron, strengthening him.

Time flowed backwards and forwards. He felt his body fall through a dozen layers to lay on the ground in a different place. A place that moved and shuddered with a familiar face looking down on him. A familiar hand holding his deluminator. A familiar sneer through a curtain of black.

Ron knew who locked his memories away.

The face faded into another Death Eaters, shorter and rounder and not his own. Press, standing passed Bill, wand half raised, look of sheer horror on Press's face though, unnerved him. There was no way Press would show that sort of startled behavior towards Bill. All the color had drained from the Death Eaters face and it reminded him of that day. With dread, Ron looked down.

Black threads lined with ice crawled along every inch of him. Under his skin and overlying his scars. His breath fogged between his lips and Ron was reminded of that day in the Department of Mysteries, all over again. The nightmare that had started everything.

He squirmed in his own skin, shying away from the sight. Ron grabbed at his big brother's hand, the only person who had never once belittled him for his fears. Who had never scoffed at his questions or paused in killing spiders or checking closets. The threads under his skin moved closer to the surface the further down his re-discovered memories moved.

Bill was fading. The wand piece crumbling before he'd even disappeared. Oh Godric. He was going to be left alone like this. With him. Ron jerked as the memories began to click in place. Bill turned, finally as the last of him washed-out into nothing.

"Be strong," Bill urged. "Harry and Hermione are coming."

Then he was gone and Ron was still there. And Press, mouth twisted and confused, eyes fascinated in a way Ron hadn't seen in a long time, just sat back and watched him convulse on the floor.

Ron didn't get the chance to be strong.

He didn't get the chance to stand.

Press had already grown bored and in his boredom had raised his wand. One long, almost lazy slashing motion. A tug starting at his chest and then encasing Ron's whole body. Before his mind even registered that he had been flung through the air, he felt glass. Shards shattering, piercing his back legs, his waist, between his ribs.

His body smashing through the window. The sound knocking out his sense of sight so that he heard the whistle of air, the gentle pounding of air pockets, the dip in his chest of gravity... long before he witnessed the sky falling away. Red warmth spreading along his chest and body, sliding from the hurt spots along his skin, tiny little bursts of pain. Something he normally associated with cold was hot, hot, hot. All of it coming together to form one sensation.

The sensation of falling three stories.

# Enemies In My Head Ch19

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter. Clearly it would have ended much differently if I was the writer of the series.

A/N: Sooooo, Ron's forgotten five weeks got away from me. As in, I wrote so much crap for it and debated just putting a little bit up, but then said... fuck it. You get the full five weeks. I know I told you that I would put all of the chapters up on Thursday, but I decided to give you the first of the chapters today. Enjoy.

**Because theses next several chapters are essentially flashbacks of the past, I have decided against writing a flashback at the top to avoid confusion (And these next several chapters were all supposed to be one chapter that got super out of hand).**

**For the flashback, I will be sharing quotes from fellow Ron lovers.**

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## Chapter 19: Enemies Inside My Head

"What other 11-year-old sacrificed himself for his friends while on a dangerous mission against dark magic? Also, remember that time Ron Weasley was 12 and he walked into a forest full of giant spiders to help his friend? In the words of one of our staff writers Ariana, "That's basically the equivalent of 12-year-old Harry willingly walking into a forest of dementors without his wand." Ron is brave enough to face his fears and do the right thing time and again, no matter what the cost and without asking a lot of questions." -Danielle Zimmerman

### Five Weeks Forgotten: Part 1: Captured

Hogwarts Hermione Granger cringed at the sight of blood. She was positive about change and about making the world a better place for

muggleborns and magical creatures. She believed in justice and that good would always win.

She was hard headed. She didn't get... No, she refused to see why some people didn't enjoy studies like her. Why they would prefer to sit on a still hundreds of feet in the air and rush around throwing a ball. That Hermione didn't understand why Harry didn't want to talk about his feelings. That Hermione didn't understand how someone could be so poor at communicating what they thought like Ron.

She was smarter than everyone else, but she didn't quite get people. She didn't understand why she wanted to shield Harry from the world, to keep him close. Or why she felt so determined to argue with Ron at every turn. Why she enjoyed seeing his wildly gesturing hands or that glint of wild abandon in his eyes as he went toe to toe with her.

Post War Hermione was a little bit better at understanding it all.

Flesh torn from bone, smearing against her legs hardly hindered her aim as she sent a volley of spells towards the next flood of Inferi. She didn't waver as a head rolled by, cut off by an Auror to her right. A woman, looking stunningly like Mrs. Weasley six months after death, reached out with a hand of broken fingers, head snapped at an odd angle, telling of a slow, painful death. Hermione turn, her wrist snapping right then left without a sound, the body dropping as if it had never reanimated in the first place.

Post War Hermione understood that sometimes feelings wrapped up in the chest in a way that choked you when they came out. Words that flopped and singed you as they tumbled into being. Sometimes there were no words at all that fit the situation. Sometimes screaming until your throat felt fit to burst into flames or escaping to stare out at a pound did better at translating the things inside of you to others. Ron always seemed to get that.

She searched for his figure in the windows. As Harry had been doing on his broom. She couldn't spot the tall, lanky frame. Didn't see a

single glimpse of red hair or a face full of freckles. She was too far.

Her hair caught.

She didn't look to see *what* it caught on. She sent a slashing spell upwards, heard the angry hiss and something sticky hitting the back of her neck as she ran. Her chest heaved, every inch of her skin covered in perspiration.

She saw Harry. The broom swerved dangerously as Harry blasted a window in, diving inside, then out. By now it felt as if every blasted window should have been broken. Every hall explored. The place was magical though. Not like Hogwarts. Nothing was quite like Hogwarts. It was magical none the less though, and it was keeping its secrets.

Keeping Ron's location a secret.

Then, just for an instant, she saw him. Running passed a window. Hermione's breath caught, she dodged an Inferi, leaped off a steep mound and into a deep ditch, losing sight of his position for the briefest of moments. Trees scattering at random across the rugged broken terrain in front of the vast manor left the viewing sketchy at best. Hermione dug her heels into a root, hauling herself up by a stray root even as teeth snapped and hands reached. She kicked out, hitting something she dare not contemplate.

Then she ran.

She sent her Patronus to get Harry as she followed the direction Ron had gone in the house. She caught sight of the manor again, searching with wild hope for the red head. She caught him again, felt her heart rip as he staggered. His hands gripping the window seal too harshly, too desperately. Then he was gone.

Hermione touched stone wall. Vines swallowed the building up, a strange power thrumming in them. She traced the wall, trying to spot



which window Ron would be at and if she could cut him off, if she could climb fast enough to catch him.

Another figure appeared in the windows above. Hermione shuddered. Her arm throbbed in remembrance of the *last* time she'd seen that face. The skulking figure of Wormtail. And then another cold realization. They were in the same hallway. Following the same path.

Wormtail was going after Ron.

Who couldn't use a wand.

Her body moved before her mind, for once swifter to action.

It took her agonizing minutes to get to a high enough mount, waving her arms wildly as Harry spun seemingly out of control towards her, before stopping near instantly. She didn't hesitate. The cold pit of fear she normally felt upon getting on a broom was completely absent. She grabbed ahold of his shirt and swung herself onto the back of the broom, her eyes trailing where the two bodies in the hall were heading.

"There!"

Hermione pointed towards a large round like outreach of the mansion. A window framing the large kitchen like space. That had been where she'd seen them. She readied her wand to break the window, to destroy the sheet of glass between them and Ron, when it was broken for her.

By a body smashing through it.

"Ro..." Hermione gasped, but she was jerked downwards as Harry dived. Glass pierced her skin as they accelerated towards Ron. They slammed into him. All arms, legs, and desperation. Grasping any body part they could reach as Harry tried to control the broom with one hand and hold onto Ron's waist with the other. Hermione had

both arms out, gripping tight to Ron's chest, her weight and his, sending the broom veering dangerously to the left.

Harry couldn't control the broom any longer.

With the last of his strength Harry forced the broom to take them through a window rather than hitting the wall. Hermione curled herself over Ron, trying to protect him as best she could. But it hardly mattered. All three of them slammed harshly against the floor, rolling to a stop, tangled among one another.

Hermione moaned, a sharp pain telling her, her shoulder was either out of its socket or broken. Harry, looking slightly like a deranged porcupine, glass sticking out of him rather than needles, was already kneeling over Ron.

Ron who was convulsing.

Hermione shrieked. She used her good arm to drag herself over to them, helping Harry turn Ron over. Harry put his hands on Ron, holding him down.

"No, you mustn't, don't hold him down!"

"Then what am I supposed to do?" Harry snapped, eyes panicked.

With shaking hands Hermione pulled out the potion. Harry shook his head, looking down at Ron and then back up at Hermione as if she were crazy.

"He's too weak, too hurt, we were going to give it to him after he recovered a bit, remember? He had the treatment this morning and I disapperrated with him! He's in no fit state to take that! We were only going to explain to him tonight. Nothing else!"

"Our plans never work out," Hermione quoted back to him.

"Everything always goes to shit. Yes? Always."

"This isn't a plan, Hermione! This is Ron!"

"And we're losing him!" Hermione shrieked. "I can't lose him! Not to this! Not to anything! We've fought too long and too hard to lose him!"

Ron stilled in Harry's arms. With her one good arm she reached forward and checked his pulse, feeling a steady, if weak thrum under her fingers. She felt magic too, almost instinctively, as if magic were flowing through his veins, forcing Ron to live passed his expiration date.

Hermione took her wand out, with a jerk and a small scream she shoved her shoulder back into place. Then she removed all the glass shards in her, Harry, and Ron. They came away with a sickening squelch noise that left her gagging. Because it hadn't come from the enemy like outside where she could be brave, but from her boys. She was never brave enough when noises like that came from them.

Outside, the battle continued to rage. Hermione traced Ron's face, gripped Harry's hand, debating silently what they should do next. Antea was somewhere here, either dead or alive, she couldn't be certain. They'd done all this for the sake of one woman she had never even met. She could care less about the woman. Honestly.

Ron though... Ron would be devastated. That mattered to her. Because she would be damned if they saved Ron from all this, saved him physically, only to lose him in other ways.

"I think," Hermione broke the silence between them. She brought out the bottle, the one that would remove the poisonous tumor inside of him. If she could just get rid of it, here and now, if they didn't have to worry about Ron dropping dead at any moment from this illness, then they could keep him safe and find Antea.

"Death must be returned, before life is dragged into the abyss," Hermione whispered. She met Harry's eyes. "The shadows attached itself to the Bezoar, Harry, we have the antidote right here! The means of returning the shadow to nothing! Why are we waiting?"

"Because we're not Healers, Hermione!" Harry snapped. "Explain everything to Ron. Bring the potion to a Healer. See what they think. Run it passed the experts, that's what we agreed on."

"We're out of time! Ron fits the prophecy Harry! He took the poison intended for Voldemort's oldest enemy. He was born at the height of Voldemort's last reign. There is no family that was more rebellious than the famous bloodtraitor family, the Weasley's! Ron is dying! He's dying Harry! We've had all the pieces all along and we ignored the signs! We let Ron fool us, we let him manipulate us like we were chess pieces, and let him play the knight. Again! I won't sit here though, not like last time, I won't sit and watch him be taken down!"

She popped the lid open, sliding the potion bottle to Ron's lips. She began to pour.

A hand covered his mouth. The potion began to glide over the fingers, being wasted. She hurried to stop, fury building in her chest, but noticed that the fingers were not Harry's at all. It was not a hand of flesh, but rather, it was a hand of light. The hand reached out to grab the bottle from her, she snatched it away, until she came face to face with the figure.

Hermione's eyes shot up, coming to meet Ron's own. He looked like a patronus, and for one terrifying moment she thought Ron was dead. That he'd chosen to come back as a ghost. But then he touched her. His warm fingers coming up to cup her cheek, his lips meeting hers, warm and tender and very much alive against her. He felt like comfort, like home, his aura exuding a tender fondness and a brittle fire of passion and loyalty. This was Ron's core, she knew, without being told, the very foundations of who he was.

Then he pulled away.

The flowing light of Ron pulled Harry into a hug, his long, thin arms engulfing Harry in the embrace. Ron's long fingers gripped her hand still, his other taking ahold of Harry's. Ron's patronus looked older than he actual was, aged somehow, and Hermione had to wonder if

they too would look that way, or if this was simply a reflection of Ron himself.

"Don't 'Mione. You got it all wrong. Dumbledore is not Voldemort's oldest enemy."

"What are you saying?! Of course he is!"

Ron smiled, shaking his head slowly.

"The shadow, Hermione, who the man was before he was taken."

"The brains were taken from people nearly a hundred years ago! Voldemort is old, but he isn't that old," Hermione argued.

"His oldest enemy isn't a physical entity," Ron whispered, "it is the first being to stand against him. The first one to stop Riddle from immortal life. Who destroyed their research? Who did everything to stop the Hocruxes from being made?"

"Herpo," Hermione answered, immediately. "But he hardly has anything to do with this time period, Ron, there wouldn't be any way to take his poisoning."

"Unless Herpo wasn't successful at destroying his own Hocruxes," Ron said, gently. "Unless he was a little old man attached to an object for hundreds of years inside the Department of Mysteries before possessing a brain that came too close."

"The poisoning of the dark lord's oldest enemy," Harry croaked, horror on his face. "It's not attached to the Bezoar at all! It's attached to your scars!"

"Remember the curse I was hit with, Harry?"

"Attracting the darkest of objects to you... the darkest of the brains came at you, the oldest, foulest of the brains."

"The old man himself isn't so bad, it's his magic, his core that's been twisted over time. It's like an entity itself... like...."

"Poison," Hermione whispered. And it was in that moment that she realized what she'd almost done to him. The potion would not have destroyed the bezoar, but rather, would have attacked his scars, would have destroyed his skin and body until there was nothing left of his arms or back. Every inch of skin and muscles that the scars were carved into would have been destroyed. Bile rose in her throat.

Ron's patronus grimaced. He was fading, but the grip on her hand, and on Harry's hadn't seemed to have loosened at all.

"No matter what happens, I love you, forever and always. If Fred and George's spell isn't successful, I want you to know that I love you both more than anything. Read the letters," Ron's patronus told them. "There's one more piece of the spell that needs to sink into my scars. If I don't get it before the shadow..."

Then he was gone.

Beneath them, Ron convulsed again.

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One Year and three weeks ago

Being cut down in war was a little like relief and a lot like terror. Relief in that you've been expecting 'it' the whole god damn time. Tense and waiting for the moment when it will happen. Because it will. Because he was the odd one out. The untalented, luckless, dimwitted third member of a group whose name no one remembered when they saw the other two. Who simply didn't measure up.

The anxiety in not knowing how 'it' will happen gnaws at you like a disease. Every corner has the potential to hide those who wish you harm. Every stranger is a potential killer. So, when it finally does happen that relief of knowing is like a single breath of fresh air after being locked away underground for a few years. And then you're

promptly tossed into an ocean made of broken glass called 'you are fucked, dear sir, so fucked.'

That fateful day when Ron walked out of the tent, his plans had been thus: Apparate to Hogwarts to check on Ginny, check on the twins safe house, spy on his parents to make sure they'd made it out safely, apparate back to Harry and Hermione and grovel like a dog for acting like a complete jackass. Rinse. Repeat as necessary.

Anger had made him act rashly. The terror though, that had made him act out unforgivably. Telling Harry how he couldn't understand the pain of not knowing if your family was alive or not. If they were hurt. Lashing out and saying the worst things.

He was going insane inside that tent though.

Almost to the point of admitting everything to Harry and Hermione. He came close so many times; crazy words on his lips like 'my scars are hurting me' and 'there's a monster like shadow in the mirror behind me' and 'the locket is making the shadow ten times worse.' He'd never once considered telling them about what the scars did to him at school. Never. Harry was always dealing with so much shit all the time that bringing in his problems seemed like asking for trouble. Like he was a spoiled brat trying to draw attention away from Harry.

He knew what would happen. How it would look. Ron, who was always complaining about something. So to claim his scars had voices, had a face in the mirror and arms that wrapped around him while he was brushing his teeth. That when he glanced in the mirror there was something not himself looking back. That when it traced his scars, they burned, and that its eyes sometimes looked kind and understanding yet other times looked like the pits of hell. Like an older gentleman who pitied him for the burden and other times like a fucking monster that wanted to drag his heart from his chest and eat it? That would go over well.

Copying Harry, are you Ron? Can't stand to be the nobody that you are, eh? Pathetic. There was no way anyone would believe him.

Hell, Ron wouldn't believe himself. Sometimes he wondered if it actually existed, if the thing that stalked him in the mirror, the thing that had dragged its nails along his body until it burned and charred his skin, really was there. Maybe it was just a traumatic remnant of what actually happened in the Department of Mysteries? What if Ron was just crazy and it wasn't actual there?

Besides... he'd brought it all on himself. Failing so miserably to help fight in the battle at the Department of Mysteries. Being hit by the Death Eater's curse. The curse bringing a monster out of the tank straight towards him. If he hadn't failed, then he wouldn't be hurting. And to add to that... he knew exactly what was happening. It wasn't a mystery. Madam Pomfrey had told him it would happen. That the thoughts trapped inside the scars would find 'outlets' in some form. She'd *told* him they would seep into his dreams, that he would experience memories of someone else, that there might be unexpected habits he developed or some other way the thoughts would get out.

So, in that case, there was nothing Harry or Hermione could do to help him anyways. The shadow staring back at him from behind his reflection was just an unpleasant, but foreseen consequence. Hermione would just fret about it and Harry would have yet another reason to be a broody bastard; blaming every sodding thing that ever happened on himself. And who needed that? And it had all been *fine*, perfectly fine. He handled it.

Sometimes it unnerved him, sure, who wouldn't flinch when they see a *thing* wrapping its arms around you in your reflection? Who wouldn't get a little sick at seeing it twiddling with shadows beside you, smiling gummily at you, black like tar stretching over sharp teeth as its mouth opened? Who would enjoy waking from a nightmare and going into the bathroom to shake it off only to see the nightmare standing behind you? He'd lost a lot of sleep, yeah, so what if he was crankier. The scars hurt a lot, sure, but it didn't compare to Harry's pain, he didn't have some evil dark lord coming after his arse, so what was the big deal?



At least, it hadn't been until he put that fucking locket around his neck.

The locket was talking to the shadow.

Arguing back and forth. Harsh whispers in his mind, words so sharp it almost felt as if he physically felt it. And both of the things had it out for him. Both could see his darkest memories. It was like a fucking nightmare wrapped up in a pretty little dementor's kiss gifted to him from Volde-fucking-mort himself.

While in the tent, before they ever found the locket, he'd heard the whispers of the shadow creeping along inside him. Separate from him, most of the time barely heard, but still lingering there in the background. He'd learned to block it out back in sixth year, awhile after the shadow had first showed up. But when the scars along his arms hurt, the thing seemed at its strongest. It had been a long time since they'd hurt though. He'd become accustomed to blocking out the simple small whimper. The trails of pain. But then... it turned into a roar.

Merlin, putting on that fucking locket, it was like his scars had opened up anew. Not quite like when they'd been bleeding, pus filled, black and blue throbbing messes along his body, but like the weeks after. How they'd open up if he stretched too far, how they bled afresh in the shower because the water pressure was too much, when he reached down to grab something or when he and his brothers started rough housing.

The locket with the piece of Voldemort's soul seemed to bounce off the shadow that lingered in his scars, like they vibrated on the same frequency, though of different colors. Conflicting. Fighting. Making themselves so known that Ron found he couldn't sleep. Couldn't keep food down. Couldn't *think* .

And one night... when Harry handed him the locket for his turn to act as warden to it, wasn't that a joke? Him, acting as a warden to them? It was more like they had the keys, like he sat in a cell with two

demented guards arguing about which one wanted to get inside first, who wanted a piece of him first? He couldn't take it anymore. He had to get out. He had to leave. He had to get away from at least one of them.

And then he'd screamed at Harry, yelled at Hermione, screamed the words Voldemort and the shadow had been whispering in his ear. He'd roared just as loud as them. Making the betrayal he felt known, enacting his own betrayal in words, in actions... in footsteps abandoning them outside of the camp. Listening to Hermione begging him to stay, to not do this, to *please* not leave her.

And then he did.

Maybe if he'd been up front about what his scars had inside of them... maybe if he had just told them from the beginning about the shadow, perhaps he wouldn't have had a row with Harry. Maybe he wouldn't have abandoned them that night.

But he had.

It took him awhile to get his head on straight. Hours. Wandering around like an addict going through withdrawals. Blank eyed and confused. Took him longer to realize how badly he'd fucked up. By that time he was half frozen, half a block away from Honeyduke trying to figure out how the bloody hell he ended up there in the first place. He didn't remember apparating. Just that he'd been thinking about the rumors going around about his sister. How they'd tortured her. How he *needed* to know if she was alright.

He found himself in Hogsmeade staring blankly ahead, his feet had stumbled forward, his mind fuzzy as he wandered around aimlessly. It took forever before he finally realized where his random apparition had taken him. To his family. To his little sister.

Standing there though... looking up at the castle in the distance. He felt like a fool. How would he even get in? What would Ginny say if she saw him? What would she think? If she was alright. If she wasn't

being tortured. Being asked questions by Snape about where Harry Potter was.

The ideas haunted him. They'd discussed how Hogwarts wasn't safe anymore. Yet they'd left *her* there. They'd left everyone really. Left them to deal with whatever happened in those walls. Neville and Seamus and all of Dumbledore's army without a leader... without a Dumbledore.

Then the air exploded.

Ron blinked, staring up at the sky, trying to figure out what happened. And then it became all too clear. A snake weaving its way through a skull lit up the sky in sickly green. Screams erupted from the next street over. From where Ron stood, it almost looked as if the thing was covering Hogwarts, casting high towers in green light.

Ron stumbled back, moving quickly into a shadowed alley.

In the distance he could see men in twisted masks herding a family out into the streets. There were at least six of them, probably more in the area. His stomach dropped. He recognized the family. The Hemmersons. His dad used to go into their little charms shop all the time to ask about odd and end things he was fiddling with. They were muggleborns who'd opened up shop shortly after graduating Hogwarts. What the bloody fuck were they still doing around these parts? Where they trying to get themselves caught?

He moved closer. Were they going to be killed? Shit. *Shit*. He couldn't just watch. What the hell could he do though? Ron took a breath, forced himself to sit down in the alley. Who knew what the hell his legs would do if he just stood there. He had to think. He had too...

There was an explosion of glass further down the street. What the fuck? They were swarming this place like insects. This was just bloody brilliant. Ron rubbed his face, his mind whirling. He needed a plan. Damn it all to hell, he needed a strategy. A distraction.

Something that would piss them off enough to leave the families around here alone, long enough to escape.

His eyes landed on the large skull in the sky. On the snake.

Or maybe he just needed a really big lion.

Ron stood, his arms aching even as he raised them high. He closed his eyes. When Harry was held up by Dumbledore in sixth year, he and Hermione had taken it upon themselves to research offensive and defensive spells. Hermione had found she was brilliant at shielding charms, at hiding their presence, creating wards, highly complex wand work. She was good at hexes. At jinx's. Filling lungs with blood. Ripping muscles. Blinding people.

Ron... not so much.

In fact the only offensive spells Ron seemed to have an affinity for were the fiery kind. Fiery spells being practiced inside of a castle... not particularly practical. Eh? Hermione had snapped at him after he'd set the third set of curtains aflame. It had been one of many things they'd argued about that year. That argument had been a nastier one. And one that caused them to agree to practice in separate areas. Hermione had taken the room of requirements. Ron, the lake at night, under a ward, close to the forest.

He started to whisper the spell under his breath. A different word to begin and end each of the nine pieces of wand work. With each one a small ache ran through his body, but he ignored the familiar sensation, knowing it would last only as long as he spoke the spell.

Standing in the streets of Hogsmeade, in the middle of chaos, he let his wand move slowly through the nine diagrams in his mind; turning his wrist at just the right moment, dragging his hand down steady, but swift, through the circle of the third diagram, not allowing his wand to go further than half an inch outside any circle, until he reached the ninth... He let his hand drag itself out of the circle, it felt heavy now, like he was holding several bricks at the end of the tip.

He didn't open his eyes though. Instead, continued to move the wand around himself, as if he were creating a ward. Light beat against his eyelids, overly bright.

As the last, ninth diagram finished in the air, Ron dragged the wand in front of him, his arm moving as if through water, and finished with the final spell.

He opened his eyes. Large as a hippogriff, a lion of flames stood before him. A string of light tinted with black at the edges attached to his wand. Standing this close, he should feel his skin heated by the fire, but there was just a subtle warmth in the air, a comforting beast that seemed to push away all of his fear and heartache. He found himself smiling at the lion. It inclined its head, sitting proud before him. Ron smiled back at it.

Ron looked up at the snake again.

"Devorabit," Ron commanded the spell, voice slow with power.

It roared its approval. Its body shot up into the sky, circling the snake, making a show. Then it prowled forward. As if it were actually stalking its prey. The snake hissed, shrinking inside the eyeball of the skull.

The lion attacked, biting deep into the end of the snake. Green light sparked as the snake tried to keep its form. Its head snapped forward, two long fangs striking out at the side of the lion. The lion simply batted it away. The fiery creature bit down hard, the end of the snake bursting into tiny pieces. The head of the snake hissed angrily as it withered, lashing out one final time, but the lion was bigger, faster, it moved out of the way, its flames seeming to slip through the fangs as if it weren't there at all.

The lion took hold of the snake by its neck, just behind the head, and snapped its jaws closed until teeth met teeth. The snake disintegrated into nothing. A roar of triumph filled the air, all the screaming having gone silent, before the lion circled the skull one

final time. It looked at the thing, as if in consideration, before its mane bristled. The lion rammed into the skull, cracking it down the middle, it crumbled even as the lion itself began to flicker out of life. The skull came apart, falling away before disintegrating into nothing. The lion flickered for a few moments longer, seeming to turn towards him and give a low bow, before the fire finally gave way to air.

Ron smirked. He resisted the urge to pump his fist in the air.

He'd just destroyed the Death Eater's calling card.

His victory was short lived though.

Angry shouts filled the air. Half a dozen sets of feet were stomping towards him. Spells were already firing even though he clearly wasn't anywhere near them. They would be on him in a minute. But more than that. They would be far away from the family they were about to murder in cold blood.

He was about to turn, to apparate back to Harry and Hermione, when he saw them. It was a mother and a little girl. The mother tightly grasping the child's hand, of maybe eight, dragging her behind as they fled from the encroaching Death Eaters.

They weren't going to make it.

Before he had time to think, his body reacted. He launched himself forward, a hex already on his lips. One of the Death Eaters had already uttered the unforgivable curse though. The same time his hex hit the face of the aiming Death Eater, the woman dropped in a sea of green light.

"Mummy!"

Ron didn't stop.

He didn't pause for even a moment as he slashed the second Death Eater. The man screamed in agony and shock as muscles tore and

bone broke. The thing dangled, blood splattering ground as Ron's feet pounded closer.

The little girl was screaming, begging her mother to get up. But even from where Ron was, he could see eyes staring blankly at the sky. Something exploded above his head. Glass shattering into a million pieces. He felt their sharp edges dig into his flesh, but still he didn't stop, didn't look behind him. He shouted out the name of a bubble shield charm. His feet almost lifting off the ground with the shattering crash that slammed into it.

Still, he didn't look behind him.

Without pausing, he snatched the girl up in his arms, none too gently, barely avoiding a ray of green light to their left. She clawed at his back, screamed in his ear, arms reaching out to the dead body behind them.

'Fuck, fuck, fuck!'

His mind raced as he dodged right then left. Death Eaters shooting off curses and jinxes as quickly as they drew breath. They weren't letting up enough for him to pause, for him to turn and apparate. And now he had an underage, easily tracked, girl in his arms and he had no doubt the bloody shits behind him had trackers.

He crashed into a corner, the little girl shrieking in pain as her leg hit the wall, but it saved them a head splitting curse that blasted the wall behind them. He sent jinxes at the ground beneath him without slowing, cursing as he realized they were leading him further and further into the no-apparition zone that Hogemeade had become. Turning into an alcove, his eyes darted about even as the sound of an echoing scream let him know his traps worked.

There was another problem though.

The girl wouldn't stop sobbing.

She was like a beacon, a siren signaling their position.

One of Hermione's rants came to mind. An old curse designed for females. She'd said the curse so bitterly and constantly, going on and on about it for days, about injustice and prejudice in the old ways. A curse designed specifically to keep females quiet. Thanking his lucky stars he had not picked up a boy and with the briefest, most silent apology to Hermione he'd ever given, Ron whispered the curse towards the little girl's mouth. Silence reigned around them. The girl's mouth still moving, but no sound emanating from it.

Ron knelt down, sending an echo of fake footsteps down the road and forcing the sound to curve around the corner. Three Death Eaters ran passed, masks staring ominously ahead with tips glowing green.

When the steps faded, Ron took them in the opposite direction. His mind went to the closest apparition point, down the east end, directly through Flourish and Blotts. He remembered Hermione saying something about the spot having ancient magic for transportation, which was one of the reasons apparition testing was done there.

Reaching the door to the closed down shop, Ron took a step back and, as silently as possible, blasted the door open. Only... it didn't blast open at all. He cursed all four of the Hogwarts house founders as he went through every attack spell he knew to no avail. The little girl held in his right arm had trickled down in tears until she was little more than a blubbering, quiet mess.

Ron growled under his breath. They needed to get out of here now. He did not have time to go around the whole fucking block just to get to the other bloody side.

Fine. It wouldn't open. It was going to be stubborn. Fine. Ron slowly drew a small diagram in the air. It alighted with fire, but nothing on the scale of the lion. Instead, this one took the form of a mouse. The little girl squirmed against him, instinctively edging away from the flames.



"Don't worry. I promise you this little guy won't hurt you," Ron breathed out.

The mouse's whiskers twitched, before it was off, its little body slithered into the lock, the metal turning red and blue sparks hissing through as it slowly, but surely worked its way through the enchantments.

Footsteps sounded from behind.

Fucking hell. They must of double backed. Ron kept his wand focused on the door, the tip glowing red as the spell continued to work, but he crouched down, trying to make his form as small as possible. The little girl curled in against him.

They turned the corner. A black mask lined with silver, half the face of a goblin, the other half human, glinted at them in the moonlight. Ron put the little girl down, forcing her body between the door and himself, shielding her as much as possible before reaching for his boots. Hidden just on the inside was a Dung bomb. Silently thanking Fred and George.

He counted to three.

Then threw it.

The Death Eater deflected it, but the thing went off, smoke and a foul smell assaulting the air. Hiding their position. Then the bolt fell off. The large clank hit the ground with such loud force, Ron felt he may have suffered a small heart attack. Scooping the little girl up, he rushed them through the door and into the shop.

Parchment and ink covered every wall. Books piled high nearly tripped him a dozen times. As he made his way through the shop, he felt the ever dangerous spark of hope. They were going to make it. He was going to get them out of here and then he was going to find Harry and Hermione and then... he'd have to find this little girls

family. He should probably do that *before* taking a kid to the secret hideaway of the most wanted criminal/savior of the wizarding world.

Probably.

In an alternative universe, Ron managed just that. Showing up in the tent with a bundle of little girl and an explanation that had the two spewing fire at him. He groveled for days on end and when he couldn't take it anymore, when they tried to force the locket on him again, he finally cracked. He broke down and told them about the shadow. He told them about everything. Looks of horror on Harry and Hermione's faces as he spilled all the lies he'd been keeping for so long. But this is not an alternative world.

In this world, a foot slid out from the darkness and tripped Ron before he ever made it out of Flourish and Botts. In this world he tumbled to the ground, shielding the little girl from the brunt of the fall, and found a wand pointed at his throat.

In this world, a very pregnant Mary Salen chose not to stay hidden in a closet upstairs with her hands over her ears chanting invisibility charms. She chose to cut the throat of the Death Eater who'd dare try to kill her. Only she found her wand pointed not at masked forms of Death, but a young man clutching a little girl and whose hair was a very recognizable red of a very notorious bloodtraitor family.

"Weasley?" Salen whispered.

"Why yes, I do believe it is," another voice spoke up. Ron and Salen raised their wands as one to the voice, but it was already too late. Death Eaters filed in one by one until half a dozen of them surrounded the three. Black gloved hands reached up to pull off the half goblin, half human mask, revealing a face Ron had seen not but four or so months ago. In a small café, shortly after a wedding.

"Dolohov," Ron whispered.

The Death Eater smiled.

The Death Eater who Ron had announced they should kill in the café back in July. Who Hermione and Harry had insisted they just wipe his mind. Perhaps it was just deserts. That if Ron had shown the same mercy as Harry and Hermione, the man might have hesitated. Things might have turned out better.

But Ron seriously fucking doubted that.

He should have killed the bastard when he had the chance.

Now the man was before him with a leering grin, recognition in his eyes as he brought his wand to Ron's neck. Trailing his skin thoughtfully as the two goons held him tightly in place.

"Your Potter's best mate, eh?"

"Potter?" Ron muttered. "We're not even in the same year, *mate*, kids like three years younger than me."

A fist slammed into his stomach.

Ron hit the ground hard, gagging.

The little girl screamed, clutching at Ron in terror, the sound unheard, but clear to see.

Dolohov went on as if he hadn't been interrupted at all.

"That blood traitor's youngest son, Arthur, ain't ya?"

A snap filled the air. Ron looked up in time to see his wand dropped on the ground. The Death Eater carefully placing his foot on the two pieces of his wand, then a careful, purposeful crunch. Ron growled in his throat at the sight; he could see the single unicorn hair slipping out. His throat closed up. His hope shriveling into a tiny ball.

"Weasley?" Ron forced himself to say with a laugh, trying to copy his grandfather's Irish accent. "Just 'cause my hair is red don't mean I'm a Weasley. Plenty o' people out there got red hair."

Dolohov smiled at him, clearly amused.

"Then who are you?"

The gig was up. If it had ever been down in the first place. Still...

"Stan Shunpike, of 'course."

Ron threw a cocky grin at the man. If he was gonna die then he'd at least die being a smart ass instead of a kicked dog.

Dolohov threw his head back and laughed.

"You know, kid, if you hadn't vouched to kill me, I might actually like you," Dolohov told him, good humor all the way. The man's wand pointed directly to the center of his forehead. Ron struggled against his captors as the Death Eaters lips moved. He was equal parts dismayed and relieved to see purple flames of an unfamiliar curse slam into him rather than green.

They'd decided not to kill him after all.

But what for?

What did they want...?

' *Harry.*'

His last thought slipped away as pain engulfed his chest and his world turned black.

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Between bouts of consciousness he became very familiar with Press, Spinsor, Dolohov, Westerfield, and, of course, Wormtail. They tried getting him to talk about Harry. Where he was, what his plans were, but Ron refused to talk. The verities being the closest they got, but not quite succeeding. He wasn't sure how long his time with them extended, only that when he eventually woke up without any of

them to be seen, it was to the sight of the little girl he'd saved kneeling before him, eyes bigger than saucers.

"You okay, mister?"

His answer was to spit out the clump of dried blood keeping his lips sealed shut. Every twitch felt as if it were stretching his skin too far. The aching that had bothered him for so long had developed into a throb that shocked him in intensity.

"Surprised you're awake. You've only been out a few hours," a voice mumbled.

Ron turned his head the smallest of margins, until his eyes landed on the pregnant woman. She was leaning against the bars of the cell opposite to them, back to Ron and the girl. If he'd had the energy, he would have moaned piteously. As it were, he settled for bringing his bloody digits to his chest and closing his eyes.

"Why'd you make me leave mummy?" the little girl demanded.

His fuzzy mind mentally flinched, aware enough to know he didn't have an answer to give a child who didn't know what death was. Or who did, but who couldn't comprehend her own mother's death. Even if he'd been able to speak, they weren't words he could come up with. At least nothing that might sooth her.

His mind started wandering off. He felt himself fading and welcomed it. But small hands shook him hard. Angry little eyes glared at him. Lips trembling. The touch caused his whole body to light up in pain and he found that while words could not be voiced, he still had the power to scream.

"Stop it!" the pregnant woman snapped.

The little girl flinched back as if slapped.

"Stop it," the woman said softer, "there was nothing that could be done for your mother. I don't even know why their keeping us alive. The boy saved you, but he couldn't save your mother."

"She was right there," the little girl whispered.

"No, she wasn't. The bad men, the men in the mask, they did magic that made her go away, even though you could still see her," the women explained. "The boy with the red hair, Ronald, made sure that they didn't do that to you. There was nothing that he could have done to save your mother though."

His consciousness faded out to the sound of sniffing and a vague wandering of his mind, questioning if one could regrew finger tips.

The next time he came to, it was to a groggy, but much clearer mind. And though it pained him to move, he was at least capable of it. Ron struggled into a sitting position, finding a body snuggled against him, fast asleep.

"Morning sunshine," a voice said.

He blinked away the dizziness, to look over. The pregnant woman was facing him this time, eyes looking down the hallway in boredom. She heaved herself to face him fully, her head nodding down to the little girl practically crawling onto his lap.

"Little one cried up a storm for hours. Poor thing. Seems those heartless pricks killed her father not but a little while ago. Her mother and her were planning on going to Grandma's to 'visit.' Mother was probably trying to get her out of the country though, if you ask me. Not even ten years old and already an orphan."

Harry immediately came to mind. Staring into the mirror of Eridid. Having nowhere to go during Christmas break. His own harsh words to Harry the last time he saw him; *"No, you don't know how it feels! You have no family!"* His insides curled as his own words echoed back at him.

A radio spewing out names of orphaned children and childless mothers and fathers. Of families wiped out and family members missing. How could any pureblood see this crusade of genocide as a goal? How did these Death Eaters look themselves in the eye each morning and say... 'today I'm going to hunt down women and children to cut their throats and curse their souls.'

Logically, he knew monsters grew in steps. It wasn't one morning, it was every morning for a lifetime. A lifetime of decisions that are just a little more crueler, a little more less tolerant, a little more fed up.

He could never see himself murdering a child. He knew Harry and Hermione never could. But what if he had the ability to go back in time? The ability to find Voldemort as that little orphan left to rot after being forced out of his mother's practically dead body. He could do it then. He would do it in a heartbeat. And if he had that ability, that darkness to kill a child under 'certain' circumstances, didn't it mean he could under other circumstances? He hoped not. He hoped never. But looking Dolohov in the eye, he knew he had the ability to kill, had done it, and wasn't that the first step?

Ron shuddered.

His mouth felt like cotton. But he managed to croak out a few words anyways.

"Hear anything of use?"

The woman shook her head. Ron let his head fall back onto the concrete floor, it felt too heavy anyways. His fingers twitched in pain. He refused to look at them, not wanting to see the missing pieces. A small ball of happiness filled his center though. He hadn't talked. He hadn't said anything of importance at all.

"Can you regrow parts of a finger after it heals closed?" Ron asked out loud.

A sharp breath was drawn, before the sound was cut off. A considering silence ensued and Ron didn't try to break it. Then...

"The nub would have to be cut off, but it could be regrown. It would have to be done by two separate potions. One for the actual appendix and then the other for your fingernails because one is alive cells and the others dead."

"Good to know."

Another silence settled between them. Not exactly awkward, but more searching, feeling each other out. Eventually though, the silence (broken only by distant screams in the background), was broken by the woman speaking.

"Are you really Harry Potter's right hand man?"

Well, the Death Eaters knew the truth. There was no point denying it to this woman.

"I was until I fucked up."

There was another considering gaze.

"I know you can't tell me anything, but... you think he'll win? Truly?"

He didn't hesitate.

"Yeah, I think he will."

She nodded, her hand rubbing her belly in a slow steady rhythm.

"You tell him thank you for me, tell him Mary Salen says thank you. Maybe my kid won't ever get to live in this world he's making, but she sure as hell would never have even this small chance if he wasn't around."

"If I ever get back, then I promise I'll do just that."



"Ron, isn't it? That's your name?"

"Yeah."

"I want to thank you too, just in case Potter never gets the chance to do it himself, thank you for being strong enough to protect him."

Ron had nothing to say to that.

Ron woke to the harsh sound of something scraping against the ground. Or rather, he fully woke. The chill in the cells made it impossible to fall completely asleep. Winter sunlight shone brightly through a small slit in the wall, high along the ceilings edge. The large blue hoodie the little girl wore dragged along the floor as she moved about it.

The little girl was drawing on the ground with a piece of charcoal, a frog holding hands with a woman and a man. When she caught him staring she gave him a tentative smile.

"What are you drawing?"

She jumped up, hands going behind her back as she grinned.

"Es a picture of mummy and daddy and Mr. Froggy."

Rather desperate to not talk about her dead parents, he grasped onto the one unfamiliar piece of that sentence.

"Whose Mr. Froggy?"

"Only the bestest person you could know," she drawled.

From across from their cell, he heard Salen chuckle.

"I've never heard of him."

She rolled her eyes at him and he was immediately reminded of Ginny at the girl's age.

"That's 'cause he only speaks with Squibs."

Dead silence reigned down on the room. The girl suddenly turned uncertain and shy and Ron had to fight to stop the pity from showing on his face. Still, he took too long, causing Salen to speak up.

"Oh? Is that right? Mr. Frog only speaks to Squibs? I'm quite jealous. He sounds like a grand person."

The girl glanced at Salen, giving a shy smile.

"He really is," she said, her voice growing stronger as she continued. "Mummy says he comes to protect all the children born in the magical world that's got no magic to protect them. But his name is Mr. Frog *gy*, Mrs. Mary, not Mr. Frog. His best friend is Alfred, the teddy bear."

She made a disgruntled face that startled a hoarse laugh from him.

"What about *your* name?" Ron asked.

"Abagail," she chirped.

"Abagail, huh?"

"Yup, don't you forget it, either, it's important."

"Don't worry," Ron assured her, fighting a grin, "There's no way I could ever forget about someone like you."

# Imprisonment ch20

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

## Chapter 20: Familiar Allies

"[Ron] He's straight forward. He doesn't try to sugar coat things. He speaks straight from the heart." -Chris Young

### Five Weeks Forgotten Part 2: Imprisonment

Days later, Death Eaters trailed into the prison. Marching passed their cells with purpose. Ron wondered what poor bastards were about to be faced off against such a large number of them. Whoever they were, he hoped it wasn't Harry and Hermione. A small voice distracted him from his thoughts.

"Where do you think they're going?"

Ron peered over at the other side of his cell. It had only been three days, but even before they'd been locked in here Abigail had looked malnourished. Larger than normal eyes, starvation wracked from a once flesh filled face, stared through the bars at the passing men. Her long face hidden behind a curtain of limp, mousy brown hair filthy from tips to top.

Ron considered her, thin arms hugging herself tightly, and thought of the Boggart exercise Remus had designed back in third year. To face your fear by turning it into something funny.

"A tea party," Ron answered. "They've got pink dresses all set up in the room above us. Teddy bear guests and balloons all over the place."

The little girl turned to him, a shy smile starting on her lips.

"Wormtail's going to be dressed in a ball gown," Ron added quickly. "Bright green with... with sparkles all over the place and ribbons."

The shy smile turned into something a little bigger.

"What am I going to wear?" She asked, her voice turning eager.

Ron thought for a moment, looking outside the barred window at the setting sun. He pointed to it, waiting for Abigail to turn and see.

"Those colors, there? You're going to wear a dress with all of them woven in it."

"Do I get a crown?"

Ron didn't bat an eye.

"A crown? Nah, too big. You'll get a tiara. Crowns come later."

"Ti... air... ra?"

"Tea-r-ah," Ron corrected. "It's smaller, got diamonds and pearls and shit... stuff, all over it."

"What's shit mean?"

Ron choked, scrambling to distract her.

"Oh, look Abigail! There's a bird at the window!"

Abigail turned, dashing over to the sill to see a blue jay peering in at them.

"That was a close call, Mr. Weasley," Salen chuckled.

"Ehehehehe..." Ron blushed. He wasn't used to being around children.

When the bird flew off Abigail let out a sigh of disappointment before she peered shyly back at him. Abigail twirled hesitantly. She pulled at the filthy, ripped clothes she wore. At her hair, filled with grease and oil.

"Do you really think I could go to a tea party?" Abigail asked, there was something so broken to her voice. Ron's entire being felt compelled to make it go away, despite knowing there was no way to, not here, not now.

"Of course you could," Ron said anyway. "You kidding? I bet you make the best tea too."

Salen snorted from her cell. Ron glanced at the pregnant woman. Her back was turned to them again today. It was always a toss up of whether the woman would be in good spirits or resigned to the fate that most likely awaited them. Abigail peered at him, disbelief in his words now warring on her face. She didn't seem to really want to play the game anymore. She picked at the bloody piece of cloth Ron had wrapped around a deep cut on her arm. She touched the dirt and grime around her face and began tugging at her filthy hair.

"Does it make me look ugly?" She whispered.

Ron got off the ground, the fingertips of his whole hand trailing dirt as he trudged over to her. He knelt before the not quite ten year old, making sure to look her in the eyes. His hand reached out and she flinched reflectively. As gentle as possible, he brushed her dirt streaked hair away from her face, wiping as much of the blood and grime from her as possible before making sure to look her in the eyes. He couldn't let these beasts take away the kid's heart. He would take care of her.

From now on, it wasn't just himself he had to worry about. He couldn't let himself mope or give up because he couldn't let her down. How could he? Nights filled with nightmares of his siblings in a place like this. Alone. Lost. Hurt. How could Ron ever abandon the kid, knowing he'd have to meet her parents in the afterlife? So Ron

ripped his shirt, taking the brown, dirty cloth and used it to tie her hair up into a pony tail, wiping the tears streaking down her face with his thumbs.

"There's nothing in the world that could take away from how pretty you are."

She blushed madly, fiddling with the hem of her worn blue hoodie. Then she shivered. There was a cold breeze coming through the bars of their prison cell window. Ron shivered too. The sun's light had faded away into nothing, leaving only the winter's darkness. Only the tiny, flickering light outside their cells let them know where the others were.

Ron opened his arms. Abigail didn't hesitate. She dove into them, hiding from the cold in his long, gangly hold. Any other situation and he would have balked at holding a stranger's child in his arms as if they were his own. But in this prison, where they only had each other, and where the nights were cold and brutal, there was no such thing as strangers.

It has hard to think that he was the adult in this situation. Seventeen years old taking care of a child as they waited each day for either death or torture. Thankfully he was the only one taken out for the latter. He honestly didn't know what he would do if they tried to take Abigail. What could he do? He fought them to his last ragged breath day in and day out. What the bloody fuck could someone like him do if they tried to take the kid?

Ron shuddered, pulling her closer to him. It had been less than a week he'd been in here, but he didn't think he could feel more protective of this child than if it was his own flesh and blood. If he'd known her for a lifetime.

"Ron?" Salen's voice called out to him from the rapidly darkening room.

Ron didn't have to ask what the older woman needed. He gently picked Abigail up, bringing them as close to the cage's bars as he could. He laid down, taking her in his arms, making sure she faced the wall to shield her from the wind. Abigail curled in against his chest. Once there, Ron slipped his long arm out of the bars and across the floor. Cold fingers interwove with his. They were overly thin, big knuckled hands, but small in his own large palm. He squeezed them, trying to give the woman warmth and comfort through their hands. The hand tightened around his.

He closed his eyes, trying to pretend they were anywhere but here. Falling asleep to the sounds of sobbing echoing from cells he could not see.

The next time they came for him, it was Dolohov. Long greasy hair pulled back in a ponytail, smile quite charming for a man who skinned muggles in his free time.

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"Take my jacket," Ron insisted.

The maroon hoodie stretched out as far as he could to where Salen huddled in the corner. The woman glared at him as she rubbed her hands along her shoulders.

"I'm not taking a coat from a child to warm myself," Salen snapped.

"I'm of age," Ron drawled in annoyance. "Besides, you have a kid in your stomach and it really can't be good for it to be in a freezing body."

Salen looked down at her stomach, rubbing the large belly before her with shaking fingers. When she looked up there was fright in her eyes. She was scared for the baby.

"It's a girl," Salen told him, "We thought it was going to be a boy for the longest time. That's what the healer said when I first got

pregnant. We we're going to name him... her Ryan, but that's no good now. We never got the chance to think up another name..."

"Do it now," Ron said, "It's got to be healthier than whatever thoughts are up there now."

Mary Salen smiled at him.

"Only if you help me."

Ron held out the jacket as his compromise. She took it. While the coat was large, it wasn't big enough to go completely over her even bigger baby bump, but the woman looked warmer.

"Call me Mary."

"What do you think about Hermione? We need more Hermione's in the world," Ron put forward, only half joking.

"A bit long."

He could of Krum who could never quite pronounce her name right. Even Ron himself had shortened the name, calling her 'Mione when he, Harry, and Hermione were alone.

"True. What about Ava?"

Mary shook her head.

"My mother sells Avon- a muggle product. She's not very good at it. Feel like I'd be cursing her to not be very good at anything if I gave her that name."

"What type of product is Avon?" Ron asked, curious, but also wanting to distract them.

They talked into the night.

---



"I'm an orphan."

Ron cracked an eye open. Exhausted as he was, Ron hadn't really been able to fall asleep in the cell. When he did it was more of unconsciousness than anything else. Still, at the desperate, low keen of Abigail's voice, he forced himself to reach out and tug at her shirt. She didn't come to him like she normally did. Instead she turned her back to him, the ragged blue hoodie blending in with the grey of their surroundings. Ron flopped onto his back, the movement stretching out the broken flesh across his stomach.

"Harry Potter used to be an orphan," Ron said, thinking of the awful words he spoke to Harry that final day in the tent. "He was all alone, his parents dead, and left to be cared for by these really awful muggles."

Abigail curled in a little more, probably thinking of what would happen if she got out of the prison cells.

"But Harry got a new family. A big family. With lots of annoying brothers and an overbearing mother and a cooky old fart of a dad for him to go to whenever he needs it. He earned that family by being too scrawny and too kind and too moralistic for his own good."

Abigail peeked over her shoulder, watching him.

"Mummy said Harry Potter doesn't have a family though," Abigail whispered.

"My mum adopted him. Not officially, of course, no one would let her officially adopt him. No finances, you see, she even looked into it. Tried to get the Ministry to approve it after his godfather died. Bunch of bigoted arses wouldn't let her though. Too many of the wrong types in the Ministry, you see."

At Abigail's blank face, Ron chuckled. He sometimes forgot she was only eight or so... ten? Didn't matter. She was young.

"Mum adopted him by showing him love. Harry stays at my house during the holidays and sleeps in my room and eats at our table. He's one of us. He's a Weasley not because of what some mean people have to say, but because we take care of him and love him."

Ron tugged at her blue hoodie again.

She turned and crawled over to him, curling into his side, her form shivering. He was a bit too numb to notice, but his breath was showing as he spoke. The cells were freezing. The torture session had left most of his body feeling only sharp bites of tingling pain. Ron pulled her to him, running his numb hands up and down her shoulders to try to bring warmth to them.

"But you've never been an orphan," Ron lamented.

Abigail glanced up at him, she had a smudge of his blood against her cheek, from where she'd laid her head against his chest.

"But, my dad and mummy are dead."

Ron nodded.

"Yes they are, but do you remember what happened when she died? I grabbed you. I chose to turn back and save you. Do you understand what that means?"

"That I didn't die?" Abigail half laughed, half winced.

"What it means is that in that moment, when your mother was cut down by Death Eaters, our eyes met, and we made a very special magical promise."

"A promise?"

"Yes," Ron told her. "You see, you were never an orphan because your mother and me made this special contract between us. She recognized me and trusted me to get you out of there. To take care

of you and to protect you with my life. You became my family with that special promise, you see, so you never became an orphan."

Abigail snuggled deeper against him.

"So, you're gonna be my dad then?" Abigail asked.

Ron stilled. There was too much of a difference in their ages for him to simply be a big brother figure for her. If they managed to get out of here then Ron would be taking care of her like a parent. He would, essentially, be her father. It was an odd notion. Ron wouldn't even be eighteen until March.

If they got out of this place alive... He would be the one sending her off to Hogwarts in a few years. He wondered which house she would be in. Maybe Gryffendor, but he had a feeling it would be Hufflepuff. If Harry and Hermione forgave him... they would help him take care of her. They'd be a family.

Ron hugged Abigail tight.

"Yeah, I'd be your dad," Ron affirmed.

"Ron," Mary called in warning. He tilted his head backwards so that he could see the woman. She was staring at him, her eyes imploring him not to get the child's hopes up. Ron hugged Abigail closer, staring at Mary with just as much conviction: *'If we're going to die here, then let her have dreams. Don't let them kill her before they actually kill her.'*

Mary Salen looked away from him, staring out of the barred window of her own cell, but before long there was a sharp nod. When Mary looked back at him, her eyes were wet, she began dragging herself to the edge of the cell. Ron answered her. Abigail dead asleep in his arms, Ron carried them over to the edge and slipped his arm out of the cell, stretching the long appendix out until it grasped Mary's own cold hand.

They stayed like that. Hands clasped together throughout the whole night.

---

"What do you think about Lavender?" Mary called.

"I think that we should stay very far away from that name. What about Charlotte?"

"My sister's name is Charlotte."

"Better than Ginerva, at least."

---

A terrified squeal filled the air.

Ron jerked awake, on his feet, hand reaching towards the sound of Abigail before his eyes were even adjusted to the dark room. He found her hands reaching for him. She was off her feet and in his arms before Ron knew what was happening. He was looking everywhere, trying to find the threat.

"It's eating the food!" Abigail shrieked.

That's when Ron spotted it. The rat. It had a large chunk of bread in its mouth. The remnants of their food scattered around its filthy, matted body. Ron aimed a kick at it. Fury and relief mixing in the pit of his stomach. Not a Death Eater. Sure. But another day going hungry. The fucker squeaked as it ran towards the bars. But just before it exited, it turned slightly and Ron swore it fucking...

"He just bloody smirked!" Ron snapped, outraged. He turned to Abigail, the girl trembling in his arms. He toned down his anger, trying for incredulous instead. "You see that?"

She relaxed in his arms, the corner of her mouth twitching.

"I'm telling you, he did!"

She nodded, snickering as she leaned her head against his chest. Ron made to put her down, but she tensed up again, clutching at his shirt.

"Don't. I don't wanna be down there with them."

Ron adjusted his grip, his tired bones feeling like a thousand pounds each, but he nodded, making sure his arms held her at the knees so she could be well placed there.

"Course not. Nasty buggers all over the place. You know there secretly planning to take over this very castle, right? They already have plans to assassinate the Death Eaters."

She giggled. The sound warmed his heart.

"The Rats?"

"The Rats," Ron said gravely. "That there was Scathac, the Captain of the guard. He was searching the prison cells to see if there was anyone worth recruiting after the takeover."

"I wasn't very brave," Abigail said sullenly.

"You crazy? Of course you were. And you knew just what to do too. Alerted the right people, got in position, informed me of the situation. I'd say he's down in his little hole informing his higher ups right now about the brave Scout."

"You think?"

"I told you he smirked, didn't I? Now why would Captain Scathac smirk unless he was happy with what he found?" Ron asked her, putting on his most reasonable voice.

"Cause he found you," Abigail said quietly.

Ron brushed her hair out of her face, like he did Hermione's whenever the bushy trail hid her eyes from him. There was no fear in

them anymore. Good.

"Me?" Ron blew air out dramatically. "Nah, I just got these big feet."

He stomped around their cell, eliciting an irritated growl from Mary. He made a face at the woman, to which Mary flicked him off as she found a new position to sleep. Her large belly giving her trouble as she moved.

Ron moved them up against the wall. It was hard to carry her. Bruises upon bruises marred his skin and every twitch sent a reminder of that along his body. The small slit of air between stone told him it was night time. Probably sometime before dawn. He had a few hours yet before they came for him again.

---

Ron's nerves were stripped.

Veriteserum.

Torture.

Mind games.

Legilimency.

And yesterday they'd just beat the fuck out of him out of frustration.

They hadn't gotten the information on Harry that they needed from him. They were getting desperate and desperate men did not make for good company when one didn't have a wand or a fighting chance of escape. Ron had exhausted every escape attempt and aversion he could. The legilimency torture had been the worst. Ron had never managed to block someone from his mind. He hadn't shown any skill in it what so ever. But aversion? Ron had aced that shit.

Training with McGonagall had become very embarrassing because of it though. Forcing McGonagall away from memories with Harry in

it had accidentally taken several wrong turns; a make out session with Lavender Brown, testing out Fred and George's products, several fights with Hermione, a not so stellar quidditch game. It got to the point where he and McGonagall silently agreed not to look each other in the eye. On the plus side, second half of sixth year, Ron hadn't been called on to answer questions even once in transfigurations. A fact that Hermione had been very confused and upset about. Low and behold, Hermione had been brilliant at creating mental blocks. Go figure.

The training paid off though.

Same as with the Veritaserum truth game.

He was so very glad Hermione forced McGonagall to teach them aversion to torture and interrogation techniques. The Professor had been more than a little against the idea of teaching them such things. Logical Hermione though was hard to argue with. Ron could attest to that.

Thankfully, with some extensive hard work, he and McGonagall had come up with several workable aversions. Chess for one. Ron had focused obsessively on chess games. Every chess game he'd ever played had been forced to the forefront of his mind. Every time they tried to seek out Harry, Ron harshly slammed them into another chess game.

Of course, Dolohov was furious. Footprint shaped bruises lined his spine and hips from where the man had repeatedly kicked him. Westerfield and Spinsor making commentary not unlike Lee Jorden from the other side of the room.

Sometime after Abigail fell asleep, Ron found his knees couldn't stay standing any longer. He slid to the floor, trying his best not to jostle her. Such a tiny little thing. Thinking of the earlier conversation, Ron tried to imagine what things would be like if they got out. If they survived the war.

A father.

Godric. What a scary thought. Seventeen years old and already he would be raising a kid himself. Ron stroked Abigail's hair, remembering the blonde woman who'd been dragging Abigail behind her, running for her life. The green light striking her in the back. He still remembered the glassy eyes staring up at him as he'd scooped Abigail up, not even pausing in his dash.

He wondered what happened to her corpse. Had they just... left her there? So many muggle borns stripped of their wands, thrown in jail, and outright murdered. Where were all the bodies? When the war ended, were they just going to find houses upon houses with half decayed witches and wizards?

Too much time to think.

That's what these walls were doing to him.

One other big question bugged Ron though. His eyes landed on Abigail. She was snuggled against him, breathing steadily, fast asleep. Mary was less so. Every half an hour or so she changed position, though being so heavily pregnant there wasn't really many positions to choose from.

Ron understood why he was being kept alive. He was Harry Potter's best friend. The closest source of information to the most wanted figure in the wizarding world. The Ministry had been taken over. The government was none existent. Death Eaters roamed the streets as freely as Hogwarts students once had. The school was being maned by Death Eaters. People were dying left and right and the only thing standing in the way of Voldemort was Harry Potter.

So, yeah, Ron got why he was still alive.

Even if the alive part was 'barely' and 'probably not for very long.'



The question burning in his mind was his two companions. Abigail was a squib. Mary Salen was a muggle born whose husband had been a pureblood actively fighting against Voldemort. The baby would be a half blood. So why hadn't they killed them yet?

Ron heard the other prisoners being taken out for execution. He'd seen the hill outside, piling up every day with more and more bodies. Countless bodies. So many rotting corpses. Not Abigail's mother though. The people were always brought in alive.

It would be one thing if Mary had been a pureblood and was going to have a pureblood kid, because they wouldn't kill a perfectly good pureblood baby. They'd just give it to a pureblood loyal family to raise. But Ron was the only one with pureblood here.

The only reason, and Ron hoped dearly he was wrong, would be that they were being kept as leverage. Against *him*. Ron had not broken. The Death Eaters knew nothing about Harry or his quest. Nothing.

But what if they started torturing Abigail?

What if they started hurting Mary?

Ron didn't trust them to not be that deprived. Some of the prisoners outside were children. Dead eyes staring back at him from the pile.

Ron wasn't sure if he was strong enough to keep his silence then. Logically, he knew that if he told, then they would simply kill Abigail after they were done. They would slit Mary's throat. If it came down to that sort of questioning, then Ron knew that they would all die whether Ron said anything or not.

Ron would lie, of course, he would buy Harry as much time as possible. He would lead the Death Eaters to wrong locations. But how long would he wait? If he gave the information away too soon, then they would spot the lie. But could he allow a child to be tortured? Even for Harry?

At the end of the day though, it wasn't for Harry. It was for the entirety of the wizarding world. Was Ron strong enough to fool them? To convince them they were truly going to find Harry Potter at those locations?

Ron's arms tightened around Abigail, trying to pull all the warmth and strength he could from her. Whatever those monsters were planning would happen soon. He had to protect her. He had to protect Mary. He had to ensure Harry and Hermione stayed safe.

A small hand touched his face.

"Why are you crying?"

Ron cupped the hand on his cheek, trying for a smile, but failing at the newly woken child.

"Cause it hurts."

"Your owies?"

"Yeah... my owies."

"Do you want me to kiss them better? Mummy always does that for me when I get an owie."

This time Ron did smile.

"My mum used to do that too."

Abigail looked at him, confused.

"Did she stop?"

"No, she just started fixing them with hugs instead," Ron lied.

Abigail grabbed his hand, the cut open flesh wrapped clumsily in pieces of Ron's own shirt. With the gentlest of touches, she kissed the tips of his fingers.

"Does that feel better?" She asked softly.

"Loads better," Ron answered.

She snuggled into him again, bringing her legs up to her chest so that nothing touched the floor. It left Ron uncomfortable, but it wasn't like the cells offered much better even in the best of spots. He dragged them into a corner and curled her against his side as he closed his eyes.

"Ron?"

"Hmmm?"

"Can you tell me more about Captain Scathac?"

Already falling into deep unconsciousness, Ron nodded.

"When I wake up."

"As soon as you wake up?"

"Yup."

"Hm... I'm not patient, so you'll have to wake up quick."

But Ron could already feel Abigail's heart slowing down, right alongside his.

"I'll try my best to wake up as soon as possible."

Abigail didn't hear the words. Already fast asleep against his chest.

---

"Will you be the godfather to my child?" Mary called, waddling from one end of the cell to the other.

"Sure!" Abigail called out.

"You can't answer for him," Mary chuckled.

"He already said he'd be *my* daddy. Being a godfather seems like it would be less work," Abigail pointed out. "And he gave you his jacket." As if that were the deciding factor.

"Is that how it works? Give a girl a jacket, get rights to a baby?" Mary asked her, thoroughly amused.

"A jacket is better than a ring down here," Abigail pointed out.

Looking at the leaking pipe in the corner of her cell, water frozen along the cement, she had to admit the little girl had a point.

"What are you lot yelling about?" Ron muttered, half asleep.

"You're a godfather," Abigail informed him.

Ron shot up off the floor.

"What?!"

---

"You don't need to do that. I've got it," Ron insisted, standing for the first time in what felt like a lifetime. Mary gave him an incredulous look, hoisting the only bowl they had out of her cell window, collecting rain water.

"I'm pregnant, not completely inept, Ron. I can collect water. Just sit down and stay down."

"I've been completely useless for days. I should be the one to..."

Mary shot him a furious look, gesturing with her free hand at the walls around them.

"And how do you think I feel? I'm the reason we're in this place to begin with!" Mary hissed. Ron was quiet then, wide eyed.

"You can't blame yourself for this," Ron told her. "It was my fault as well. Taking all of that on, that's too much."

Abigail didn't understand though.

"What's too much?" she asked, looking from one to the other.

"If I'd just stayed put... you would have gotten away, I probably would have managed to get out. We wouldn't be waiting to die. None of this would have happened," Mary confessed, staring blankly out at the rain.

Ron thought about Harry and Hermione. Of all the horrible things to happen because he left them. The thought of never seeing them again. All because of the locket and Ron's own dark thoughts. Finally, he said.

"We can play the what if game until we're dead, or we can do something about it."

Mary stared at him, both eyebrows raised.

"And what would you propose we do, Ron?"

"You said you helped muggle born's escape, right? You make port keys?"

Mary nodded.

"Teach me."

He hadn't realized it, but at some point Mary had become something more than the strangers. He felt connected to her. Warm around her presence. She was the first adult Ron thought of by her first name. Even Sirius had been a 'Sir' in his mind. Mary was the first adult who Ron didn't look up to, but who he thought of as an equal. It was an odd thought. If he had been with Sirius or Lupin or Dumbledore or any of the Order then there would have been a submissive sort of relationship, they knew more than him and Ron would listen to them.

Mary wasn't such a person.

She was just as terrified and clueless of what to do as Ron himself was. Less so even. So in the quiet of their cells, Ron told her his plan, and she took it up and accepted it like the last breath before drowning. It wasn't much, but it was better than anything else they had.

Mary taught Ron how to create a port key. They practiced the movements, the wand work, the spells until Ron thought he would be able to do it non verbally as well. It hit him, how it was that so few people knew how to create port keys, why it was such a sought after profession. The movements were short, but complicated, 12 jerking strokes clockwise and then, depending on where one wanted the portkey to go, there could be anywhere between 1 to 60 strokes. The whole design based off of clockwork, to ensure that the place you landed would be at the same time you left. Otherwise one could end up, say, in Africa, six hours after they left.

Normally one worked for months learning the ins and outs of the spell work. Mary said her last apprentice took nearly half a year to get the ins and outs of the art down. But Ron needed to know all of it now. Two weeks had passed since they started, using every hour to whisper the coursework back and forth, to ask questions, to copy movements.

The Death Eaters were up to something. They were coming more frequently, watching them, watching Mary. They had a plan, he and Mary and Abigail, they were being kept alive for a purpose. And it had a timeline coming up.

Ron's plan was simple: They would each stay on the look out for an opening to escape. A wand. A weakness. A slip of the tongue. Anything that would help them. Then, if one of them got ahold of a wand, then they would create a port key and get back to the others.

The big advantage here was that the Death Eaters were not aware of Mary's ability nor that she was teaching Ron. A port key would be

able to get them passed the apparition wards. It would distort the area around them, creating a single hole in the wall to travel through.

They just needed one opportunity. One chance.

---

"Why don't we name her something like Scarlet? Or Rider?"

"I feel like either of those two could be porn star names," Mary shot down.

"A star name? What's that?" Abigail asked.

"Er..." Ron looked to Mary who grimaced.

"It's uh," Mary started, "it's a name that sounds pretty, but is meant to protect a girl's identity when she's doing things that are not so good."

"So a star name is bad?" Abigail asked, her face scrunched up.

"Er..."

"So I guess I won't be sending your god child over for any important conversations," Mary joked.

"What do you think about Vivian?" Ron asked instead.

"It's about as terrible as your ability to think on the fly. Apparently."

"I'm brilliant in battle."

"You'll need it when I ask you to change the diapers."

"Was that in the godparent contract?"

"It's heavily implied."

"I'm hiring a lawyer."

---

He dreamed of a home. Of Hermione and Harry. The three of them living together and enjoying each other's company. He dreamed of reading comics and story books in a small office library with Hermione leaned up against him. Her too serious books on her lap, pouring over them, flipping through faster than Ron (with his bigger letters and shorter pages). He dreamed of playing quidditch with Harry and working beside him as an Auror.

Ron dreamed of living in a home with the two people he cared about more than life itself. Of being happy and content, snaking fingers along palms and snuggling in the warm of blankets. All the while being filled to the brim with contentment and fondness.

And then he woke up.

He came to in a little room with ice forming around his ankles and around his wrist. Ice creeping along his waist until his body was numb and stuck fast. His maroon hoodie was nowhere. Bare skin, his pants the only thing remaining, sharp icicles jabbing at his bare stomach and stabbing at his arms.

Press stood in front of him.

Smug.

Ron spoke, but the words croaked out of him, garbled and laced with a reddish black goo that slid down his lips and dribbled onto the ice encasing him. Press twirled his wand, casual, thoughtful, determined.

"Glad to have you back with me, Weasley."

Fingers touched his face, but Ron didn't have the strength to jerk away like he wanted. Hadn't had the strength in hours. Had it been hours? Felt like it. In and out of consciousness though, could be more, could be less. He blinked hard, but the blurriness didn't fade. If anything the dark lingering at the corner of his eyes leaped forward, trying to grab hold of him again.



"Ennervate!"

Ron jerked. Wide awake. Alert. Rocking back and forth. His lungs weren't working though. They refused to inflate all the way. Funny how you never notice that your lungs inflate and deflate until they refused to do either.

Press spoke again, but the words were wrong. Syllables sounded familiar, but the words were contorted on the man's tongue. Like they were trying to be two things at once. Ron could play that game. He could say things that meant two things.

"Fuck you."

"Yes, you have an extensive knowledge of the English language," Press guffawed. "But it would be far more impressive if you could say it in French as well."

Press spoke spells and curses and charms, but it didn't matter what you labelled them, they all hurt. His chest burned and his lips throbbed and the ice numbing him seemed to numb only the parts that weren't engulfed in agony.

"No, no, you can't die yet, Mr. Weasley, you're still useful."

Huh. Ron suddenly knew what it felt like to need to piss, but to not be able to feel his penis. Supposed that was in ice too. Everything was ice or fire. Numb or in agony. Could he piss still? That would suck. Pissing himself on top of everything else. If he died here, would that be how people found him? In a prison of ice with piss all over himself? He'd be like one of those fucking angels. The dramatic muggle paintings Hermione's dad liked so much. All gory and symbolic and shit.

What would he symbolize? Bloodtraitors? The fight against Voldemort? What not to do when on the run from Death Eaters? That last one sounded about right. Here kids, you see this painting? This

is why you don't run out on your best friend just because you're a jealous tit of a fuck up.

Fingers were gripping his chin. The smell of vanilla hitting him in the face. Like Death. Death smelled of vanilla and blood. Blood and vanilla. Could be a cologne. Sell like hot cakes. Come get your intimidation cologne! Selling fast. Five Knots a bottle.

"You really are a pretty thing," Press murmured. Fingers sifted through his hair, trailing his face. Then teeth gripped his lips and a tongue invaded his mouth. His lungs protested. Ron tugged away, but he was pinned. Death was in his mouth. When he thought he'd die from lack of breath, Press pulled back.

Ron spit, but there was no liquid in his mouth. His skin was ice, but his mouth was dry, the closest to moisture was red, red, red. A taste of iron and vanilla filled his insides and he couldn't get it out.

Presses thumb wiped the blood from Ron's chin.

"It really is too bad that they need your blood for the ritual," Press said. "I could take you home. My wife would be delighted. She likes the colors, you see, too many bland folk around. But you? Such beautiful eyes and that hair."

Press's fingers traced Ron's stomach, moving downward.

"I bet it goes down too, doesn't it Mr. Weasley? Beautiful boy. Such a waste. But..." Press pressed the tip of his wand to Ron's head. "At least I have permission to try my spells, wei? Experimentation on humans is illegal no matter where you live, but it's for a good cause. Can you imagine... being able to teach children how to speak other languages with a simple spell?"

Then the wand was brimming hot white magic again, searing his head and tongue, scorching downwards to his lungs. Ron rocked back and forward, no longer capable of screaming, his muscles

tearing and burning as eyes cut into his skin. Presses words were barely distinguishable among the pain, pain, pain.

"Let me die," Ron tried to say, tried to beg, but nothing came out.

The experiments continued.

---

"Mary," a small voice wailed. "Ron's hurting again."

He couldn't bring himself to answer or move. It had been two days and being awake meant hurting. He'd willed himself into unconsciousness so far, but now the need for water surpassed the 'hot-cold please let me die' sensation. His body felt like the desert, as if it were made of a million dry pieces of sand grinding together from his throat down to the lumps he once believed were his toes.

"Water, baby girl, you see the water? You need to pour it in his mouth. If it overflows then rub his throat, it will make it go down," came Mary's voice.

His mouth filled with lukewarm water. Hard dirt like clumps mixed in. Metallic, as if it had sat inside a bucket for a few days. It was also the best thing he'd had in his life. He drank until there was nothing and then fell back into darkness. A body scooching closer and lying against him.

---

"I had a classmate named Hadley once," Abigail told Mary.

"Sounds like a boy's name," Mary said, blinking hard to keep the light of the sun from blinding her.

"But she's a girl."

"I'm gonna say no."

"I'd bet she'd like it."

"You can ask her when she's old enough to understand the conversation."

Abigail blinked at her, imitating an owl.

"Wouldn't that be too late?" Abigail asked.

"Yes. Yes, it would be."

---

When Ron came to, he realized his hand was being held by familiar cold fingers. His neck creaked painfully, stiff and aching from its tilted back position on his folded arm. His head felt like lead as he moved it the barest inch to peer across the cells. Mary was curled into herself, her lips a frightening shade of cracked blue.

The heavy shivering told him she wasn't dead though.

Abigail lay against him, her blue hoodie the only thing he could really see of her. Ron brought his legs up closer, trying to warm the little body with his own. It was too cold to sleep safely, but too cold to be awake either. Outside no stars shown, only the black and grey of snow clouds.

"Talk Ron," Mary croaked.

Startled by the noise, Ron peered at Mary, big brown eyes blinking slowly at him.

So Ron told stories, of the three witches and the unlucky knight and of Babbity Rabbity and all the stories he could think of from his childhood. He told stories about the Niffler and the Silver bird, of stories of his brothers, he talked until his lips cracked and bled. The blood warmed his face for a moment, before freezing with everything else.

When he ran out of stories, he asked her to tell him muggle ones.

Mary told her favorite. The story of Sleeping Beauty, Briar Rose, the princess trapped by a curse, the prince who defeated a dragon, and the fairies who helped it all happen. The Princess who escaped her prison.

"What about Rose?" Ron asked as the sun began to rise and warm the bars around them. "After the Princess who escaped?"

There was a long silence before Mary spoke.

"I think Rose is perfect."

# Red Coats and Risks ch21

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter

A/N: Some of this, you've already read, but I wanted to make sure everything was in chronological order and not missing.

## Chapter 21: Rituals and Red Coats

"Ron Weasley may be the most criminally underutilized character in fanfiction. Poor Won-Won, getting sidelined into Hr/R fluff pieces if he's lucky or bash!Weasely fics if he's not. It's almost overlooked these days that, in canon, Ron was the Samwise Gamgee to Harry's Frodo Baggins. Ron was Harry's best mate, not Hermione (as wonderful as she is). Ron was the bloke who happily took in another brother. No bouts of jealousy, big or small, can change that."

-Muffliato

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### Five Weeks Forgotten Part 3: Escape

Ron woke to screaming. He jerked upward, startling a sleeping Abigail into alertness. Without thinking he rolled to his side, thrusting Abigail behind him and throwing his right arm up to defend against whatever was coming. The screams continued, now a recognizable voice, but nothing came towards him and Abigail. The girl looked up at him, fear in her eyes. He set her down, motioning for silence as he moved towards the bars, positioning himself to see into Mary's cell.

Inside the dingy prison, lying on the floor, clutching desperately at her stomach, was Mary Salen. Ron shuddered. The baby was coming. He could see the movement of her belly, the woman's legs naturally being forced apart as she became dilated.

"Hey!" Ron screamed. "Hey! We need some help down here!"

No one came.

Ron cursed, pacing back and forth in his cell like a wild animal. Abigail had retreated to the corner, pushing the palms of her hands against her head, humming to herself. Ron's long strides took him to her corner, scooping the little girl into his arms in one fell swoop. Abigail latched onto him, seemingly trying to merge herself with his chest. He put a hand on her head, stroking her hair as he leaned as close to the open hallway as possible.

"Bring me to her cell! I'll deliver the fucking baby myself! Just do *something* !" Ron roared.

No footsteps sounded.

"Ron."

Ron's head jerked in the direction of Mary. She'd stopped screaming. Between contractions probably. She'd somehow managed to drag herself to the very edge of her cell, her right arm stretched out across cement and dirt towards him. He understood immediately.

Ron sat on the floor, still holding Abigail in his arm, but reaching out with his long limb to grip Mary's hand. Tears rolled down the woman's face, stark against the grime and dirt smeared from weeks of captivity.

"Ron," Mary whimpered.

Their hands entwined. His large fingers wrapping around her white knuckled, small ones. They squeezed his hand lightly and he squeezed them back. Then the oddest thing happened. Mary sort of melted out of her panic. She relaxed. At a time where panic was the best and most heavily anticipated moment of their imprisoned careers, Mary Salen seemed suddenly the opposite. There was an odd calmness about her as she gritted her teeth, as she jerked and spasmed, as her breathing steadily became more ragged and haggard.

"Baby was due any day," Mary murmured comfortingly. "This was bound to happen."

"What do you want me to do" Ron asked, not nearly so calm.

"Did I ever tell you that my mother owned a café?" Mary asked.

"NO?!" Ron squeaked, thrown off guard by the topic, but going along with it anyways.

"Well, she did. I inherited it last year, but I thought 'why would I want to make coffee when I'm a witch?' Most don't even like coffee." Mary laughed, breathing hard and fast, as she clutched at her stomach. Her stomach that was *moving*. It was contorting, he could see what looked to be a tiny fist hit her stomach and the sight nearly made him puke. Was this what giving birth meant? He'd been too young to remember Ginny being born.

"Yeah?" Ron gulped, "And now?"

"Now," Mary said a bit too loudly, mirroring his shriek. "Now, I think I want to work in a café. I want to make lattes and cappuccinos and all sorts of other muggle none sense drinks. What do you think?"

"I think that sounds fantastic. This time next year you'll be introducing Diagon Alley to coffee beverages, yeah?" Ron said unsteadily.

"Yes. And I'll teach you how to make all of them. You'll be my head manager. What do you say? We'll move the whole damn shop. We'll serve Pumpkin Spice Lattes and Butter Beer Frappuchinos and all sorts wizard happy drinks for the masses."

Ron would have replied, but a contraction hit. Mary screamed. The sound echoing down the halls of the prison. So he gripped her hand, feeling the circulation cut off. After it finished, Ron took up the subject. Anything and everything to distract her from what was about to happen soon.



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When the Death Eaters finally responded, they marched in carrying daggers and wands at the ready. Ron slammed his head against the forehead of one Death Eater. Mary bit and kicked. He shouted for Abigail to run, but the little girl was struck down with a spell before she ever turned.

They lost.

The handle of a dagger struck the back of his head.

Vanilla candles were what he woke to. The smell so strong, he gagged as it forced itself into his mouth, and something else beneath it, something familiar, but that he couldn't place. Bleary eyes opening wide to a room full of tiny flames dancing with malicious intent. Dry sobs heaved from the center of them. Mary, arms stretched and magicked to the floor, like an offering. And on the other side of the ring of fire a tiny figure sat, silent as the grave. Abigail.

Ron groaned as he tried to move his body, limbs stiff as a board, so numb they were no longer even tingling. His right wrist caught in the rope and a shriek of pain and surprise ripped from his throat. He tried to turn his head to see, but it remained fixed ahead, stiff as everything else.

"Wha... the fuc..." his words slurred together and the urge to vomit crawled in his stomach, despite nothing haven't been in it for weeks. His body was too hot, too cold, icy cold, too hot... chills and sweat trailing his skin from spine to toes.

"Well, I certainly didn't expect you to be awake for the ceremony. Didn't expect you to survive your part at all, really, what a pleasant surprise," a familiar voice murmured, humor painting his words on a frame of casualness.

Westerfield walked into his line of vision. He tried jerking his head up, to glare the man down, but his sight stayed fixed straight ahead, Salen's tear streaked cheeks and trembling lips centered perfectly

before him. Abigail's rocking body just at the edge, strands of magic keeping her in place. His blurry vision sharpened for the briefest of moments then, spotting Dolohov, Press, and Wormtail in the background of the...

Of the ritual circle. Dozens of candles connecting an intricate diagram of red. That's when the smell beneath the vanilla hit him. Iron. Blood. That was blood on the floor. He squinted against the candlelight, trying to figure out where all the blood had come from. Then his wrists caught again and he hissed.

Slick. Both his wrists felt as if they'd been torn apart. Wetness making the ropes slide and rub into the wounds. He felt blood trailing out of him, draining him, to slide down his arms and onto the floor. Him. All that blood had come from him.

Westerfield's green eyes came into view and for the briefest of moments his mind went to Harry. But these eyes were not filled with kindest, they did not hold any amusement in them, not even betrayed fury like the last time he'd met Harry's eyes. They held mirth. An intent to cut into him until there was nothing left. A desire to etch his hatred into Ron one final time before this was all over. For good.

Those eyes walked in front of Mary, blocking the woman's body from sight, and now Ron could see a dagger, dripping wet with blood. It hung from the man's fingers like a pendulum.

"You should feel proud of yourself, Ronald," Westerfield told him. "Before we got ahold on you, we were quite stumped how to get our hands on three pints of pure blood. Plenty of mudblood to go around. Lots of half-bloods mucking about. But purebloods? Well, most of those are our own kind."

He felt his hand twitch, but Ron didn't know whether he managed to flick the man off or not. His words were on the tip of his tongue, a solemn 'fuck you,' but they rolled around like a pair of dice, never landing where he wanted them to.

"We were thinking we'd need to ask Snape a favor, ask him to sneak out one of them bloodtraitors he's got causing him havoc in Hogwarts. I'm sure you know the ones..." Westerfield told him, his lips widening until sharp teeth glittered at him.

"We were thinking of that feisty little wench you've got for a sister, Ginerva, isn't it?" Dolohov questioned, pushing off from the wall. "Cooped up as we are, might have been fun to play around a little bit before doing the job."

Dolohov winked at him and he lost it.

Ron yanked against his bounds, howling in rage. He felt the magic slam him back, felt his whole body jerk and stiffen. He threw himself against it, felt the wounds on his wrist stretching out wider as he bared his teeth at the men. His throat raggedly fought with the air, wrestling to get any in, but he hardly noticed, hardly cared.

"Animaux barbares," Press's deep French accent filtered through the air in disgust.

Westerfield turned, a manic grin spreading across his face.

"Is our dear Ambassador uncomfortable at the big boy's table?" Westerfield purred in delight. "However will you stand beside our Lord if you cannot even stand mere taunting?"

Press's tall, lean figure straightened, eyes glittering in anger as he moved forward, but Wormtail put his arm out, silver fingers splayed for all to see. The fat, little man's eyes cast furtively about the room.

"Is... is this really the ti-time for such thi-ings?" The man stuttered. Wormtail's eyes met his own in that moment. Ron pushed every drop of hatred, every loathing corner of his mind, every scant bit of energy he had left into his next words. Slow, ragged, but filled with brittle, seething rage.

"Harry's the one who will find you first, Wormtail."

The man shrunk back as if he'd been physically struck. His entire body flinching. Because they both knew that when Harry found out about Ron's death, the boy who lived would make sure to survive the war long enough to rip Wormtail apart piece by piece. It did not matter how terrible the argument he'd had with Harry was or the circumstances of Ron's capture. None of it mattered, because at the end of the day...

Harry was his best friend.

They never spoke it out loud, of course, guys didn't say things like that to each other, but Ron loved Harry with every inch of his being and he knew Harry felt the same way. More important than that though... Wormtail knew. The traitor had witnessed first-hand how far they would go for each other, knew the depths of their friendship. So while the other Death Eater's in the room scoffed, laughed, silently disregarded, Wormtail cowered beneath the threat.

"It's been three weeks, mate," Westerfield reminded him. "And we haven't heard so much as a rumor of Potter breaking wind, much less searching for his right hand man. You've been abandoned. Not even your oh so precious bloodtraitor family has come looking for you."

At that moment a contraction hit Mary. The woman screamed, fingers dragging across the dirt spewed floor as her body arched.

*' Help her!' His mind roared. 'Help her you bloody fucking monsters!'*

The words though they tried to be voiced, came out as little more than a small wisp of hot breath. Heard by no one. Mary jerked, her legs spreading out involuntarily.

"Let's get on with it already," Dolohov groaned. "Before the bitch births her monstrosity and ruins everything." Dolohov lifted a dagger from its sheath. It glittered black, as if made from onyx rather than metal. Wormtail and Press moved to opposite sides of the Ritual circle, their feet touching the edges of Ron's blood.

"No, no, nooooooooo," Mary moaned. Her fever soaked brow turned from side to side, hands weakly lifting off the ground as far as the magic would allow her to go.

Westerfield chuckled at the woman, standing directly behind Abigail, the child uncharacteristically still. The magic holding Ron back wove around his hands with the strength of steel. A hot/cold sensation ran down along his skin, one Ron recognized as blood loss. His shoulder ached in remembrance, the chunks of flesh missing from the arm some months ago still fresh in his mind.

He was dying.

Westerfield and Dolohov began to chant. The blood, his blood, began to rise from the ground, before attaching itself to Press and Wormtail. Wormtail squealed, but didn't move. Press, stoic and unimpressed simply opened his arms to the dark magic. Like a second skin the blood moved over them, until the two figures could no longer be seen. Blood statues.

Mary screamed, another contraction, and then Dolohov was kneeling, still chanting, but kneeling. The knife in his hands poised over her stomach. Ron jerked, pulling and tugging at his bindings, wrenching both his magic and body against the holds.

"Stop it! Don't you fucking dare!"

The words echoed in the room. Dolohov glanced up at him, green glittering eyes manic in glee. Then he plunged the dagger into Mary's side. The sound was horrific, a long winding trail of rage, horror and agony. It wouldn't be until later that Ron would realize it was because Mary, Ron and Abigail had all screamed at once, their voices one.

Dolohov dragged the dagger along the side of her moving stomach, opening her up as if he were skinning a rabbit. Blood poured out over the circle, an organ slipped out to lie on the side of her body, still attached. Mary convulsed.

Blood soaked dagger in one hand, wand in the other, Dolohov let the wand glide through the air along Mary's body and suddenly long strands from her body began to pull from her stomach. The sound of tearing filled the air, mixed with a squelching.

The chanting paused.

"Blood of the pure blood. Muscle of the Muggleborn," Dolohov said lightly, watching in fascination as Mary began to gurgle and choke on her own blood. "Organ of a squib. Breath of a new born half-blood."

The muscle moved through the air, wrapping around the blood statues of Press and wormtail. The bodies of the two men began to contort, a sickening, grisly display of blood and muscle. Press's blood statue began to shorten and widen. Wormtail's began to lengthen and thin out.

"A permanent polyjuice," Westerfield said, still standing behind Abigail.

Polyjuice.

They were taking each other's place. Becoming each other permanently. The muscle was beginning to sink in, a black magic warping and aiding it. Then Westerfield pointed his wand at Abigail. Dolohov and Westerfield began to chant.

*' Organ of the squib.'*

"Noooooooooooo!" Ron blacked out.

And then *it* stirred. Silent for the last several weeks, the shadow woke. His scars ached with the motion. The creature moving just under his skin, dragging itself through his silver, magic infested scars.

There was no mirror, but Ron could see him, it, both.

It was the old man and his shadow. Standing in front of him. Old wrinkled fingers cupped his cheeks, the kindest yet wisest eyes he'd ever seen looked right into his own. Behind him, the shadow, hosting empty sockets and a black, oozing body stood waiting.

*' I can help you, but it will come at a price.'* The old man's voice was like flowing quicksilver. *'If you accept my help, you also accept his possession. He will sink into your bones. It will give you the strength to fight, to leave, but it will also kill you down the road.'*

"But I could save them?" Ron's voice rolled off his tongue like fire and passion. It struck the darkness with a definitive, defiant clang. The darkness seemed to split with his voice. The old man's eyes were approving in their stare.

*' You can save her,'* the old man corrected.

Right. Mary was... the thought rang out in the darkness, in pain and horror, it was consumed by the darkness. Ron realized that this place, wherever they were, reacted to the people who inhabited it. Reacted to their thoughts, their words, their feelings.

He could save Abigail. The thought was like warmth and fondness and hope.

"Yes, do it," Ron thought and said at once. Harry and Hermione would take care of her after he died. He knew they would. As long as Abigail lived then... it was worth it. Ron had accomplished nothing. He had let them down. He had walked out on him. If he could do this, if he could save this child, then he could die feeling worth something.

Ron was dying when he woke up. Yet he never felt more powerful. The binds snapped free. His legs gave out, dropping him to the floor, he felt more than saw the black threads around his body. A swirling black mass of magic.

Then his eyes snapped open.

The ritual circle was a whirl of magic. Wormtail stood on one side, where Press had been, no, it was Press. The other side still stood a blood statue, looking more like Press than Wormtail. Dolohov stood, a wailing baby covered in gore, being held upside down with one hand. The Death Eater gripped the babe by her foot, staring down at it as if it were a monstrosity.

And Abigail. She lay on the ground, her chest open, one of her lungs missing.

Fury and hatred consumed him. He opened his mouth and rage poured out, a scream that broke his throat. The shadow reacted, black threads and darkness darting forward. Dolohov never stood a chance.

It struck him, the black thread slamming into his mouth and coming out the other end. Ron was on his feet, grabbing at the baby even as Dolohov's body crumbled. The baby wailed in his arms, Mary's blood slipping off the babe and soaking onto the front of his shirt. He cradled her, holding her head even as Westerfield raised his wand.

The Death Eater couldn't move fast enough though. The black threads of the shadow had him by the throat and arms, clamping onto him, bones cracked and flesh tore. One moment the man was whole, the beginnings of the Avada curse on his lips, the next he was in three pieces, head rolling away, arm detached from his body.

Ron glanced at the blood statue, the second portion of lung still in the process of sinking into the body. The shadow seemed to know, instinctively, what he wanted. It struck, tossing the blood statue against the wall. Blood and muscle fell away, leaving the real Wormtail to crash against the floor. The piece of lung though, it was embraced in darkness, hovering in the air.

Ron reached out, making sure not to jostle Rose, and found the organ in his hand. As gentle as possible, he placed it on top of her chest. He was no healer though. He needed a spell to put it back into place, to attach it to her lungs.



Ron picked up Westerfield's wand, pulling the other wands off the ground and shoving them into his back pocket.

"Duo in carne una polmonem. Curare. Curare. Simul," Ron spoke, magic weaving from his wand around Abigail. He tried to steady his voice, but it leaped and wavered in his mouth, coming out in uneven noise that only somewhat resembled what they were supposed to be. But still, the lung fell into her body, attaching itself to the branch of lung exposed.

He knew, without having to be told, that it was done wrong. The lung needed to be attached on a micro level. He didn't have the skills to do so. But maybe this was good enough to get her to a hospital. Ron pressed the tip of his wand to her chest, thinking back to the few emergency spells he knew.

"Vivificabit," Ron chanted, over and over again.

Preserve. It was meant to temporarily 'pause' the person. To make a single breath last ten breaths. To make a single heart beat last for a hundred heart beats. It was supposed to give a witch or wizard time to get the injured to the hospital with the least amount of damage.

When Ron looked up it was to see that Press was gone. He wasn't sure what the man looked like now, if the spell had completed for him and he was now Wormtail permanently, or if the French ambassador still looked like himself. But the spellwork hadn't finished for Wormtail. That was sure to put a wrench in their plans.

Beside him, Mary's body was cooling. She stared up at the ceiling with no sight, a large chunk of her insides all over the floor. Westerfield and Dolohov were dead. Wormtail dead or unconscious. Ron didn't bother to check on the last one. He could care less.

Rose was still crying. They needed to get out of there. It would be freezing outside though. He needed... Mary was still wearing his red hoodie. With a cringe and a desperate look around, he realized it was the only thing he could use to wrap the baby in. Gently, he used

magic to remove the jacket, wrapping Rose in it as carefully as possible.

Then he turned to Abigail. So still she looked like Death. Every minute or so though, a breath would come. Ron carefully pulled her into his other arm, dragging them outside of the ritual room.

Blood pumped, sliding down both sides of Abigail's chest. He needed to close her up. Ron sent puffs of air into her lungs, gently trying to close the skin together. Trying to give Abigail every advantage to survive. Abigail turned her head to him, her mouth moved, revealing teeth stained with blood.

"I got ya," Ron muttered. As much to himself as to her. "You're fine. You're fine. It's almost closed."

A large chunk of flesh moved across her chest to stitch itself back together.

"R-ron," Abigail whispered.

"Shhhh, Abby, don't try to talk. It's okay. I got you, Abigail."

Ron worked until the sound of clapping distracted him. His head shot up to see Spinsor. Ron placed his body in front of Rose, positioning himself over Abigail to give them the best protection he could.

He felt the shadow move again. He let it out. Let all the magic and rage out, concentrating on the worst spells he knew. They came out, pouring from him without a word. Spinsor dived, pulling out his wand, aiming at him. Ron moved forward though, drawing the fire away from the kids.

They exchanged fire, cracks and whistles filling the air as they dueled. All the while the invisible clock over Abigail's head ticked away. Ron growled, throwing his most powerful spells outward. He needed to end this, needed to get them away.

"She's dead," Spinsor growled. "Don't matter what happens to her now."

Ron glanced back at Abigail, spotting a line of blood seeping from her mouth. Was she choking on her own blood?

"God damn it." Ron swore, he slashed out his wand, sending a Sectumsempra Spinsor's way. It slammed into the man's barrier, cracking it. "She isn't going to die. I'm going to save her. I'll I need to do is KILL YOU!"

"She's as good as dead," Spinsor told him. "Look at her chest. Look at yourself! You're a walking corpse. You'll be dead too, soon enough, whether I kill you or your wounds do."

It was true. He could feel himself weakening. His knees buckling under him. But the shadow wasn't finished with him yet. It wasn't willing to give and neither was he.

"Mummy, I'm scared," the blood choked voice of Abigail said.

"Mummy's not here, Abby," Ron said softly. He crawled backwards, peering down at her, turning her head so that the blood ran out rather than back down her throat. "Ron's here though, I'm gonna get you out. Just look at me. Don't look down. Think of Alfred or the Fair. Anything. Just..." Ron wasn't sure what else to say. "Just keep your eyes on me and stay awake."

"Don't leave me. Don't leave me, daddy!" Abigail croaked. Ron wasn't sure if she was talking to him or her real father, but either way, the answer was the same.

"Never."

Ron thought fast, casting a shield in front of them to buy them some time.

"Do you remember the thing Mary taught us? Repeat it in your head."

"It hurts!"

Ron shot more air into her lungs, trying to stitch it up as spells hit his shield.

"I know. I know it hurts, but I need you to keep yourself awake. Think of what Mary taught us."

"I can't."

Ron tore Abigail's shoe off, beginning to cast spells. He pictured the clock in his head. Ticking off the time and picturing the spot far out in the woods, the place he could see from where he was. He didn't trust himself to be able to get them farther. He wove and painted and jerked his hand this way and that.

It was as the last of the magic sank into the shoe that their world exploded. The barrier fell. Spinsor charging like a bull. Ron began to cast a barrier, Spinsor was faster though, too fast for Ron to pull it up. So he did the next best thing, heaving his feet under him, Ron rushed forward, meeting Spinsor with his own body, using the half-formed shield as a battering ram.

They both crashed to the ground. Ron reached for the power of the shadow, it eagerly agreed, stretching out from his person. The dark magic took hold of Spinsor, the half-breed troll screamed as the magic burned him. He watched without care as the threads began to dig into his flesh, began to tear him apart just as easily as the other Death Eaters.

And then the deluminator hit the ground.

Ron was startled, the Death Eater falling to the floor in a heap. Harry. Hermione. He turned to the kids. Abigail. Rose. Ron leaned forward and snatched the deluminator, shoving it into his pocket and rushing

towards the children. He cradled Rose in his arms and gently grabbed ahold of Abigail. Then, with the last of his strength, he dragged the dark magic back and grabbed ahold of the shoe.

The blood red foot prints in the snow must have been from Press. When he found them after port keying, he knew that they would lead him to the apparition point off the land. The problem was the tracer on them. When they first arrived at the prison, they had placed dementor tracers on him, Abigail and Mary. He needed a means to get rid of it or wherever he went could be traced.

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Ron followed the foot prints to a bridge, watching as they disappeared into the river.

Ron had a pocket full of wands, a child under one arm, a baby in the other, and two sliced open wrists still bleeding, making him wonder how he wasn't dead yet. A dozen or so Dementors on his arse and more than a few Death Eaters hastened his steps only so much. Ron was sure he should have gotten them killed at least twice. As it was, if none of them were on his tail, he was pretty sure he'd still be royally fucked.

He ducked under a bridge. Feet sliding down rock and a collection of jagged, broken tree branches. Within minutes he had the two kids on the ground, wand out, protection barriers going up one after another. All accompanied by the plop, plop, plop of dark matter sliding from the gaping wounds on his arms, down his back and gliding along the curve of his cheeks. The shadow chortled in the back of his mind and Ron knew he'd damned himself to something horrible by taking its hand.

Couldn't think about that now.

The babe was wailing. Abigail wasn't moving. The dementor's were coming. The shadow inside of him was the only thing keeping him on his feet (most likely the only reason he hadn't dropped dead yet too).

There was no regret. He just had to keep moving. Keep standing until... just, he had to stay standing. That was that.

A bare heart beat under his fingers. Coming to a spot more defensible than any he'd crossed in the past mile, Ron set the babe down, then dropped to his knees, watching helplessly as Abigail jerked, convulsing as the open chest gapped at him. He whipped one of the stolen wands into his hand, concentrating on stitching skin. His black magic glowed around the little girl, keeping the organs pumping past their expiration date. Expanding the lungs in a jagged bid for air. Ron urged the skin to pull tight, but there was too much missing. A portion of the lung was gone and Ron had no potions or time to create anything remotely close to what she needed.

*' You could use your own though.'*

Ron blinked at the thought, looking down at his own chest. Was he skilled enough for that? Abigail looked up at nothing. Chest heaving in quick short intakes, blood coming out in globs.

Ron closed his eyes. Hermione would know a spell. She would know how to do this. He tried to think. Tried to remember anything to do with healing the body. With transferring living material into another human being. All he could think of were healing charms though. Cuts. Slices. Gauges. Bruises.

He had nothing.

He wasn't a healer.

No. Don't think like that.

Ron scrambled for the deluminator, holding it above Abigail, trying not to think about what was coming. When he was little and fell out of the tree, Ron had broken his leg and fixed it, right? What had he done? He'd wanted it. He'd wanted all the pain to go away. He'd wanted his hurt to be gone.

Well, Ron wanted *this* hurt to go away, more than anything he'd ever wanted.

Concentrate.

The deluminator in one hand and his wand in the other, he put both across the open chest of Abigail. Ron let the light of the deluminator shine over them, willing the light to swirl around Abigail, to do what he needed it to do. He willed all of his magic into his hands. He felt them heat up, felt his whole body itch with magic. He felt his wrists stitching back together. Felt Abigail's frame pulling itself into one whole being.

*Heal* .

He urged. Give her mine. Give her strength. Ron concentrated, letting his love, his life, his magic, his everything... shoving it all into his hands and into her. And then he felt it.

Its arms were around him. Its embrace against his back and along his arms. A darkness that shadowed the light. Ron tugged away from it, willing the light in his hands to expand, to push it out and to continue healing. It lashed out.

The pain Ron had felt building in the past year or so exploded inside his body. Ron screamed, his cry joining the wailing babe as his body felt as if he were being ripped apart from the inside out. The light around his hands dimmed.

The healing ceased, leaving the very center of the wound unhealed, a set of lungs moving tiredly up and down before shuddering and stilling.

No.

Ron reached his arm out, trying to touch her, but his body was aflame. His skin stretched too tightly against his muscles, a spasm

attacking them as his fingers twitched to reach. A gurgling mess of words half words sputtered out as he pulled himself forward.

Abigail didn't move though. She was staring at the ceiling of the bridge with glazed over eyes. Tears drying on either side of her cheek. Her ruined blue hoodie covered in matted flesh and muscle.

No. No. No.

"Abigail?" Ron rasped.

It was as he touched her cooling body that Ron saw his hands were black. His arms were wrapped in black thread. His scars... they were throbbing with dark matter. Baby Rose sobbed her little heart out, feet away.

His forehead scraped against rock as he tried to will light back into his hands. Tried to force back the shadow bent on consuming him. Patronus. He needed his patronus. Light thoughts. The best thoughts. He closed his eyes as the shadow wrapped around his heart.

He thought of Hermione, soaking wet with sweat, emerging from the depths of the library. A triumphant, annoyingly smug look on her face.

He thought of Harry, coming off the pitch, dirty, but grinning, the snitch compliant in his hands.

The snitch.

Harry's first snitch.

A clue they couldn't figure out.

The Hocruxes.

Leaving.



His hold on the good thoughts cracked. He felt the shadow's greedy fingers tighten. Its eager form pulling at Ron's light, devouring it. Everything was shutting down. He felt it. An icy thread making its way through his body.

Abigail's corpse only an inch from his hold.

Failure.

Hermione's face came to mind. Her tears. Her scream for him to come back.

Harry's anger slammed into his with fresh accusations. The argument they'd had. Throwing the locket at them. Out of his mind with the voices and the darkness, crowding in on him, but most of all, the look of betrayal on Harry's face.

Ron wasn't strong enough.

Not to withstand the shadow.

Not to protect Hermione.

Not to stand by Harry's side.

Not to save Mary.

Not to save Abigail.

Not to save...

Ron's breathing hitched as the sound of a baby's wail continued to fill the air. An air much colder than before. Devoid of happiness and light. Dementor's were here. They were ignoring him, but they were sniffing out Rose.

They were getting closer and closer.

If Ron couldn't save her by beating the darkness then... Ron would invite it in.

Fully.

The Dementor's came in one large pack. They swarmed like locusts. Shadowlike robes trailed the barrier he'd hastily thrown up, the creatures fanged faces peeking under the bridge. Their heads tilted as they seemingly listened to the sounds of a baby's wail and a screaming teen.

The shadow grinned. Ron felt it sink into his bones. Knew the moment it began to spread along the entirety of his body. Before it had ravaged against his body's magic, but now... Now it ravaged against his physical body.

It felt as if the Shadow was peeling his skin back, like it was growing thick roots around every joint and muscle, expanding there until it fit into the nooks and crannies of his being. There was a noise now, louder than the baby's wail. Ron was startled to find it was him. His voice had cracked and he was screaming. It sounded horrific. Like a dying animal.

There was one good thing though.

Out of his peripheral Ron could see the dementors had stopped their approach. The louder he screamed the more they seemed hesitant to come anywhere near him... them. His chin on the ground, arms underneath him, Ron reached for the pit of darkness and took hold of it. He felt more than saw the throbbing scars on his arms twist, threads of darkness lifting up just enough to encase him in a protective layer. Instead of memories of light, Ron took all of the pain in his heart, all the images and memories of hurt.

His mum... the way she looked passed him.

Fred and George, who chose to share their secrets with Harry instead of him.

Ginny, who hadn't looked at him with anything but contempt since the Department of Mysteries.

The teachers who saw nothing in him worth note.

His classmates, those fucking questions in their eyes when they saw him next to Harry.

The argument.

The way Harry's eyes lit up in anger at him.

The resentment he'd seen in Hermione's eyes as he forced her to choose.

The hatred Ron felt certain they must feel for him.

Mary's death.

Abigail...

All the failures up until now.

And then he released it. Black magic spanned out from his body. The dementors fled. Ron wasn't sure what to think of that. If the Shadow was just that frightening or if it was something else. Perhaps if the dementor's sucked out light then a place where there was the opposite took something from them?

He didn't know and he didn't care.

The shadow, spent of its energy, retracted back into his skin. Ron felt relief, but knew that now that he'd finally given it, that things were only going to get worse. He could only hope to get Rose as far away from him as possible and then...

Then what? Whatever he'd done with the shadow, whatever he'd agreed to or accepted, could he really bring that sort of trouble to

Harry and Hermione? Besides that... would they even except him back if he apologized?

No, he couldn't imagine them forgiving him.

But maybe if he told them everything, maybe if he came clean about what was happening to him and why it was that he left... then what? Ron looked over at Abigail, the little girl's body causing Ron to flinch. He was too drained to cry. Too exhausted to feel empty. Too hurt to let it truly hurt him.

Touching the wand hurt.

His magic felt torn and useless. He knew, without trying, that his magic wouldn't work for him. In a daze, he peered at the baby, who'd finally stopped crying. Funnily enough. Apparently being manhandled by a Death Eater from her mother's womb, escaping a castle of murderous wizards, being on the run through a swamp like forest, and going head to head with a group of Dementors was enough to tire the babe out.

And then a thought struck him.

Half numb, Ron stumbled to his feet, scooping the baby up in barely functioning arms. The baby breathed peacefully, wrapped in his torn maroon jacket, dried blood and gore stuck to her skin. Alive.

For one fearful moment Ron thought he killed the baby.

He dragged himself to her, pulling her to him like a lifeline, cradling her head in his weak arms. She blinked up at him tiredly. Ron felt warm tears of relief slide down his face as she grasped onto his thumb.

Then he looked towards Abigail.

What was he supposed to do? He couldn't leave he...

The sound of charging feet announced the deafening encroachment of Death Eaters and Snatchers. He still wasn't far enough away from the castle and its enchantments. He wasn't far enough to disappear. With a heart breaking glance at Abigail, Ron staggered through water, holding the baby above the slow paced, but icy depths. Dragging himself out on the other side, he felt the pull at his magic stop. He was out of the anti-apparition field, on a small crooked little path just under the bridge.

Shouts dogged him from all around. Ron hugged Rose to him, picturing the small muggle train station Hermione had shown him once while they'd been staking out the Ministry. He pictured the bench they'd sat at, holding a newspaper between them so as to remain hidden. Her warm brown eyes nervously checking the entranceway.

As he turned, he saw four or so Death Eaters pointing wands at him, all standing in front of Abigail. As if she were nothing. A pure sort of hatred clutched his heart. He felt the Shadow latch onto as he and Rose disappeared. He'd kill them. He'd kill every last one of them. His eyes met Spinsor's own. A foul kind of awe on the half troll's face.

Even as the tug of apparition took him, Ron knew the Death Eaters trace was on his skin. They could track him no matter where he went. And where should he end up but in a small muggle location outside of Manchester?

A bathroom in the Manchester Train station.

---

One had to wonder why the most phenomenal things happened in bathrooms. He and Harry had saved Hermione from a Troll in a bathroom and in doing so created the best bloody thing to happen in his life. A bathroom was also where he nearly lost his little sister Ginny and his two best friends (one to the reflected eyes of the snake and one to the snake itself). The Chamber of secrets having resided in one such bathroom. And then, of course, the delightful

taking down of one's enemies in bathrooms. Harry may argue with him on this point, but Ron was thoroughly convinced that Malfoy being slashed up was pretty damn wicked and Ron, for one, would happily repeat the performance. Amateur

And here he was *again* in a bathroom.

Sink water rinsed off bits of flesh and away. Big blue eyes blinked up at him, a small yawn as she grabbed ahold of his thumb. She tried to put it in her mouth, but Ron gently tugged it away. Far too dirty.

They needed clothes, supplies, a place to go. Green eyes and bushy hair swam into focus in his mind, but Ron shook himself of it. It had been so long since his capture. Harry and Hermione were long gone and Ron wouldn't be able to find them. At least, they better not be so obvious that Ron could find them. He'd lecture them into the ground if he found them easily.

When he'd worked through the strategy of breaking into the Ministry to get the locket, Ron had warned them over and over again about what to do if they got separated. No obvious places, think remote, think muggle. The worse it was for Ron to find them the more difficult it would be for other pure blood wizarding families to find them.

The disaster that was Hogemeade was proof enough of that.

Ron tucked Rose deeper into his maroon coat, Mary's blood looking no more sinister than water. Ron knew though, felt the stickiness along his fingers. The Death Eaters would be looking for him and the Dementors would find him soon.

The trace was new. Something he'd overheard Winchester talking about. They would be here soon enough. Unfortunately. Ron stared at the baby, a strategy forming in his head. You weren't supposed to put port key markers on people. It was illegal. An invasion of privacy and rights and had the potential of splinching if you weren't careful.

Ron was out of options though.

There was a type of port key marker though, one that would allow only one person to use the port key, that would let Ron get back to Rose no matter where she was. It had been created with horrible intentions. An abusive wizard who beat his wife. The man had developed the port key so that he would never lose track of his wife. Mary had told him about it. She'd intended to place one on Ron and herself, because Mary wouldn't be able to run with the baby. It would mean that as long as Ron got away, Mary could port herself to his location.

It had all been part of a strategy that had failed terribly.

Ron let the wands drop out of his bloody fingers, the digits like ice, but despite the raging water, Rose was dry. Thank goodness. He locked the doors, carefully waving the wand he'd chosen (Press's wand) about the air, testing it out. When he thought that he had the magic under control, he began.

He wasn't good enough to lay the spell work onto himself, so he chose the red jacket. Slowly, he crafted spell after spell, walking in a clockwork motion, counting the minutes and seconds to match the clock on the wall. Measuring his steps and picturing the diagrams as he worked.

Bangs came on the door, but he ignored it.

Concentrating harder on this than anything else in his life. He could not let Rose down. He couldn't let the deaths of Abigail and Mary to have no reason. If he could get Rose to a safe place, if he could ensure her safety then at least something good could come of all of this.

Slowly the magic settled on his chosen key ports. All it needed was the smallest smear of his blood on both. Ron leaned forward, noting the accuracy of the small tattoo now lying on Rose's upper arm. He put his wrist to her, the blood turning a bright blue before sinking in. He did the same with the coat, watching it sink in.

Ron scooped the baby into his arms. She peered up at him unhappily, grumpy and tired and altogether put off by the giant dragging her about to such loud and unpleasant places. Ron peered into her big brown eyes, the pouting nearly crying baby girl in his arms, at his goddaughter, and knew he was in love.

She was his. His baby girl. His Rose.

And he would murder anyone who so much as thought about touching her. Ron hugged her to him and thought hard. She couldn't come with him. The Dementors were tracking him even as Ron spoke. He needed to get rid of the trace and he needed to get her to safety.

Ron stepped out of the bathroom.

All stations, King's Cross and all those around Great Britain, had anti-apparition wards around them. Back in the first war against Voldemort, his followers had a thing for attacking muggleborns, escaping the country via muggle transportation, stations also tended to be places of mass gatherings for both wizards and muggles alike, so after the war, the Ministry had simply decided against taking down the anti-apparition wards. It was why Ron chose a station to escape to. Hermione had told him about this one.

When they had been researching the Ministry, she'd brought him to this place so that he would be capable of apparating to the closest spot if they were caught. Of course, that hadn't happened. Their plans never seemed to ever work out. Not once.

They'd probably laugh about that someday, but right now it sucked.

When Ron stepped out of the bathroom, he suddenly became exceedingly aware that he looked quite demented, covered from head to toe in blood, slashed up, with a baby in his arms. The entire station was staring at him. Ron tugged subconsciously at his ragged clothes, his butchered fingers causing gasps to escape the crowd around him. His cut open, sluggishly bleeding wrists scrambling the



crowd. He stumbled back, clutching Rose closer to him. How stupid. How bleeding, fucking stupid could he be to apparate to a public, muggle place. But *they* wouldn't expect it. *They* wouldn't think to search for him here. It would give him time. Time he desperately needed.

The words 'Rose' and 'safety' sprang to the forefront of his mind. The gore covered, newborn in his arms, wrapped up in what remained of his red jacket. The exhausted little girl slumbered on, unaware she was an orphan. With wild, manic eyes Ron looked around, searching for an idea. His eyes caught on a small travel store. Clean towels, clothes, and food lining the shelves. He reached for his pocket, searching for cash, before a near hysterical laugh escaped his lips.

Right.

Old habits die hard.

War prisoners didn't have money. Escaped prisoners running from Death Eaters and Voldemort didn't *need* money. Ron walked forward, grabbing a travel bag and filling it with all the things he needed. The clerk started walking towards him, but with an almost absentmindedness, he pulled out his wand, imperiusing him before he made it more than a couple feet.

When his eyes landed on a bottle of water, the bag dropped, the cap was popped open and the lid off, the cusps of the bottle at his mouth before he even knew what was happening. The liquid felt like blissful ice to his starved throat. Then the whole thing was empty, plastic crinkling in his hand.

Panicked, Ron looked for more, grabbing onto the next one only to have a hand on his arm, stopping him. Ron jerked out of the hold, cradling Rose close to him, eyes shooting up. His feet took him several feet backwards, until his back hit glass, cold walls. A muggle man was staring at him, compassion and concern shining bright and real in his eyes. The sight, after so long, was unreal.

"I didn't mean to startle you, young man," the muggle man started, "I can see you've suffered something truly terrible. You need to take it slow, drinking water, I mean. You can hurt yourself if you drink too much, too soon."

Ron stared blankly, nodding slowly. That made sense. He'd only had a few sips of dirty water the last few weeks. That made total sense. It was probably why it was so hard to think. Everything felt hazy. Then again, Ron was pretty sure he had a concussion.

"Thanks," Ron slurred.

What to do. What to do. What to do. What was his next move? Ron looked around. The bag on the floor. Right. Supplies. Run. Where? Safety. No. No. He needed to get to Hermione and Harry and that was definitely not safe. But the baby... he needed to get the baby somewhere safe. Safety. Safe House. Bill's House. Shell Cottage. He needed to get to Shell Cottage. Bag. Bill. Baby. Then danger. Then Harry and Hermione. He needed to fix things.

"... name?"

Ron blinked. The muggle man was talking to him.

Questions. No more questions. He couldn't answer questions.

Ron shook his head.

"You don't know it or you don't want to tell me it?" The muggle man asked, gently.

"Tell you," Ron slurred, "I can't tell you."

"I won't let them get you."

Ron's eyes widened, he reexamined the muggle man. Not muggle?

"You know who they are?" Ron blurted.

"Well," the muggle man said slowly, "No, but I can see someone's hurt you in a bad way. I can see you're disorientated and that you're running from something. I can see you're not gonna let anyone hurt that baby, which means someone's trying to. The police are on their way though, they're going to protect you, so if its family that's been hurting you or if a stranger got ahold of you, let me assure you that they won't be able to get to you now. You escaped. You are safe."

Po-lice? They were like muggle Aurors, right?

His dad had to deal with them all the time at his job. They came in and tried to fix the problems caused by magic, but didn't know how to fix it. His dad pretended to be 'specialists' all the time when they went in to handle things for them.

He really didn't want to deal with muggle Aurors.

"I'm fine," Ron lied, "I need to get out of here."

"There's no need to run," the muggle man said.

"I have a safe place to go. I don't need the... police," Ron tried to move forward, but the man put his hand, gentle yet firm, on his chest. Ron flinched as several layers of bruises were touched.

"How old are you, young man," the muggle man asked.

Questions. No more questions. He shouldn't answer questions.

The muggle man's eyes were shifting between him and outside the muggle travel shop. A distraction. The man was distracting him, giving these police muggle Aurors time to get there. Ron mentally cursed. He bent down and scooped up the bag, but the movement woke Rose. Tears welling up until the newborn began to cry.

"Shhhhhh, Rosie, it's okay, we're okay now. Ron's gonna make it all better," Ron muttered, moving the baby up and down.

"So, your name is Ron?" the muggle man jumped to ask.

The cursing in his head intensified.

He glanced at the muggle man uneasily. Eyes darting to the exit. The man saw, holding his hands up in surrender to show he was trying to be harmless. He needed to get out of here. Ron limped out of the store, people backtracking as he moved forward.

The muggle man was still following him though.

And then Ron knew what he was going to do. Harry might just hate him for this but... Ron pulled out his wand, pointing it directly at the kind hearted muggle man.

"Listen carefully," Ron started, slowly removing Rose from his jacket. "This baby is very precious, her name is Rose, say hello to her please."

"Hello Rose," the muggle man said.

"Good. Now, I need you to take Rose to an orphanage. Don't tell me which one. I can't know. I need you to take her to a nice one. One that will make sure she gets a family if I don't come back for her. I want you to tell them her name, say that you found her on the streets."

Ron handed the baby to the muggle man, stroking her hair and kissing the top of her head. Then, he pulled the red jacket to himself, glancing at the still glowing symbol on its sleeve to reassure himself that it was still there.

"I want you to protect her. Get her to the orphanage safely and make sure that they'll take good care of her."

Ron stepped back, the aching in his wrists like a second heart beat now, his strength seeming to flee, as if Rose were taking it all from him.

' *Keep it.* ' Ron thought. ' *Stay strong.* '

"Go!" Ron commanded, before he could change his mind.

The muggle man turned, cradling Rose to him as if she were the most precious thing in the world. Taking her to an orphanage. Away from Ron. He shivered. If Ron didn't survive, he was dooming a child to grow up alone. But if he took her with him, while the dementor's tracer was still on him, then she would die.

Which was worse?

He hoped he never had to tell Harry what he'd done. Hopefully he could get rid of it and port to her within a few days. But if he couldn't... He thought of Mary. Of what the woman would think of this decision.

Without the baby in his arms, he was suddenly aware of how very alone he was. The loss of Abigail and Mary... of Harry and Hermione surrounding him like the hold of the brains had back in fifth year.

And he still didn't know if his family was safe.

He turned to leave, to go somewhere less public, with less people. He thought of all the places he could go to get the tracer off: Bill was the first thought, a curse breaker, but also a husband. Bill could take it off, but how could he talk to his brother without leading half of Voldeort's followers to his doorstep?

The train station shook. Lights flickered. Suddenly, the black shadow like figures of Death came crawling through doors and out from the trains passage. Wizards and witches wearing tormented masks on their faces, black cloaks over their shoulders.

Death Eaters.

Muggles screamed. There was a stampede as people rushed to get to the exits. Green light flooded the place, bodies dropping at a

terrifying speed. And in the center of it all, Ron stood. Wand raised, tracer on his skin, a shadow waiting to be unleashed.

*' Time to see what your worth.'*

The Battle began.

# Soul Complete Ch22

Disclaimer: I do not own Harry Potter

A/N: Last of the memories. Happy Holidays!

## Chapter 22: Soul Complete

"Ron Weasley took care of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger when they were too busy taking care of the rest of the world to worry about themselves."

-Solemyswearr

### Part 4 of Memories lost: Coming Back

Pius Thickness stood at the head of them. Pristine as ever, Robes a brilliant burgundy against the black robed, white masked Death Eaters. Appearing out of thin air, the muggles who'd been unsettled by Ron's presence now began to flee in earnest. Screaming and dragging their children behind them, heading for the exits.

Ron stepped forward, picking up one of the abandoned café drinks outside of a shop, the man had even left his suit case. He took a sip as he walked forward, it tasted a little like coffee, but more like caramel, sweeter than the disgusting cappuccino Hermione liked. It tasted pretty good, actually. It hurt a little though, hot against his cracked and bleeding lips. Nothing like the cool, easing water.

A muggle woman slowed down enough to tug at his arm. When he met her eyes they were urging him to leave. They didn't know who these Death Eater were, didn't know why they were here, but they could sense, on some level, the amount of danger they were. She was a heftier woman, with the bearings of a mother. She reminded him of his own mother, probably taken to carrying the clock around again as her children fought a war outside her doors. The moment startled him into speech.

"Go. If you stay, you'll die," Ron told her.

The woman tugged at his arm again, her fingers close to the gaping wound across his wrist. She glanced at the men then at him.

"Sarah!" A man called, grabbing the woman's arm. "We have to go."

"Come with us!" She urged.

"They'll just follow. They're here for me, not any of you, this is the end of the line for me."

The man stared at him a moment, before grabbing his wife around the waist and hauling her in the opposite direction.

"I'm sorry," the man said.

They were soon gone, with the rest of the muggles. Ron wondered how long it would take for the damage to be fixed after Harry defeated Voldemort. He wondered how many minds would have to be wiped and if it were even possible to remedy it. He remembered the muggle headlines he and Hermione found about the huge pile up of cars caused by Death Eaters hunting Harry. The muggles called it an 'unexplained phenomenon.' Some called it a terrorist attack, others claimed it was a natural catastrophe, something in the earth. None of the stories matched up and only the craziest of theories had anything close to the truth.

Is that how his death would be seen?

Was there, at this very moment, battles going on just like this one? Survivors. Rebels. Muggleborns. Half-bloods. Purists. All fighting on the streets and in alleys, in stores and in homes, on every front there were casualties taking place.

They never knew what happened to Gideon and Fabien Prewitt. Their bodies couldn't even be found. The only confirmation they had was of some Death Eater piece of shit under Veritaserum stating



that he and five other Death Eaters had ambushed them after they'd broken the taboo on Voldemort's name.

Last words and thoughts.

Last actions.

Last brotherly stand.

They were only known to the Death Eaters who had murdered them.

Harry and Hermione would never know how sorry he was, how much he loved them both. They would never know what happened to him or how much he regretted his decision. They would never know about the Shadow or of Abigail and Mary. They wouldn't know anything about Rose.

' *Will you help me? One more time?*' Ron asked the shadow.

Ron didn't have to look down to know his veins had begun to turn black. A wet sensation ran down his cheeks, black dripping onto the lid of his stolen drink. A Death Eater with a porcelain mask of an elf shot a spell at him. He dodged, finding himself further in the center of the Train Station. Pius Thickness held out his arm, stalling them.

"Ronald Billius Weasley," Pius declared, holding out a paper with Ron's face upon it, "You are hereby sentenced to death for the murder of Westerfield and Dolohov, for resisting questioning in concerns to the location of the number one most wanted wizard Harry James Potter, for assisting the number one most wanted wizard Harry James Potter in attempting to overthrow our savior the dark one, for destroying a dark mark in Hogsmeade, for assisting in the escape of several wanted wizards and witches..."

Ron took another sip of the warm drink, letting it trickle down his throat and warm his insides. Then he set it on the ground. The lid showed lips marks, like what Ron witnessed on women's cups,

lipstick. Only instead of the pink or bright red of gloss it was the red of blood and black of infection.

"Surrender," Pius was still talking. "The dark lord will show lenience if you declare your loyalty."

Ron pulled out his deluminator. Hoping it out before him, almost casually.

"I think it's time that the snakes die in the darkness they so love," Ron called.

"And what is that?" A Death Eater chuckled, stepping forward to stand beside Pius. "A toy from your brother's shop?"

Ron smiled and clicked the deluminator.

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Thrown into complete darkness, Pius and the Death Eater's scrambled to cast Lumos spells. A few tried to relight the Train Station to no success. Just as Ron predicted. They would be forced to choose between Lumos and offensive spells. All the while those light spells would do little good, since the Shadow was now completely wrapped around him. They wouldn't be able to locate him even with their magic.

Picking up the discarded coffee Ron tossed the latte as far from him as possible, the cup smashing across the ground, followed by at least a dozen curses in its general vicinity. Silencing his footsteps, a bloody good spell he'd learned from Charlie for working with dragons, Ron moved as fast as possible towards where the curses had come from. Feeling no regret at all, Ron non-verbally slashed his wand forward in the deadly Avada Kadavra before throwing himself to the left.

The same moment he felt the heat of a curse inches from his feet, he heard a body drop.

The thing about being alone, surrounded by the enemy, was that Ron didn't need to worry about friendly fire or harming an ally. There was only himself to worry about. Here he was, again, by himself in the middle of a Death Eater raid. Only this time Ron wasn't running from the shadow or the voices in his head.

He was welcoming it like an old friend.

Full circle. At least that's what it felt like to Ron. People screaming and running for their lives. Death Eaters falling upon him. It seemed only appropriate to return the favor. The shadow, like some twisted, cracked shield, hovered over his skin like a second, living breathing skin. It would give him time he needed to perform the spell that could wipe out all these bastards. The spell whose instructions had been slipped to him by Dumbledore himself shortly before the man's death.

Ron started in on the first diagram, of eight, dodging rather than bringing his wand up to defend. Black threads lifted from his skin, blocking the random spell to get through.

There was something entirely too freeing about facing death. It no longer became a game of taking chances and strategy. More than anything else, it was a dance for fire brimstone. He was absolutely calm because he knew the outcome. There were too many of them. Yet... here he was, doing more for Harry and Hermione than he had when he was with them.

He'd gotten Rose to safety.

He was going to take out Death Eaters. Not one or two. All of them. He knew just the spell for it. Something he and Hermione had come across during their research to destroy hocruxes. Best of all, it had been right up Ron's alley. Ron pulled all of that freedom and determination into the first diagram, completing it.

*"No, Ron," Hermione had hissed. "I know your good at fire spells, but this one... its far too advanced. It can't be controlled. Even*

*Headmaster Dumbledore would have difficulty with this one."*

*" But it can destroy them," Ron had snapped. "We don't have anything else yet that can do that. I can do this. I can perform the spell. I can destroy them!"*

*" You could," Hermione said slowly. "But you would also be killing yourself in the process. This spell work is meant to destroy forests and armies. It's meant as a last resort."*

Ron moved into the second diagram, watching as the last of the muggles escaped up the stairs. He just had to contain it to this one area. He had to make sure that it didn't go any further than that.

A thrill of excitement went through him. He was torn up and falling apart from his toes to his destroyed fingertips, but he was going down helping. For once in his miserable life he honestly felt as if he were going to make a difference. He forced those emotions into the diagram, taking a step left, dodging an Avada Kadavra at the same time.

The third diagram formed as easily as child's play. He drew up all of his hatred for the Death Eaters before him. Some he recognized before the lights went out, some he didn't, but all of them had the crimes they committed etched into their faces. The death of Hannah Abbotts mother, the abduction of Olivander, the deaths of his late Uncles Fabien and Gideon... he remembered every radio broadcast announcing the names of the dead. He remembered the terror in Mrs. Cattermole's face as he led her out of the Ministry with all the other muggleborns. Finally, he remembered Abigail and Mary as they were slaughtered. He forced all of those hot, burning, hate filled emotions into the third diagram.

The thing about fiendfire, was that it was crafted by emotions. Much like a patronus, but fiendfire required eight, distinct emotions placed inside eight diagrams to fuel the beast of a spell. It didn't matter what they were, they just needed to be powerful.

Ron moved into the forth. The black threads around him shielding him from three separate slashing spells. He ducked down behind a pillar harboring a clock on its front. Guilt. Guilt for his attitude while they searched for Hocruxes, for making Hermione choose, for the words he'd spoken to Harry, for leaving, for being incapable of saving Mary and Abigail. For not being good enough to help anyone. He slipped it all into number four, feeling both relief and aching sharpness as it left him.

The pillar fell.

Ron raced forward, dragging his wand through the air, drawing the fifth diagram as he did so. Little thought for this one. Love. Ron loved Hermione Granger. Ron loved Harry Potter. He loved Ginny and Fred and George and Percy the prat and Charlie and Bill and his mum and dad. He loved them all from his very core and fiber. He was in love and loved by and loved for a great many things and even though at times he doubted the people around him liked him very much, there had never been any doubt about love.

Ron dove behind a trash can, fire now spreading around him even as he moved into the sixth diagram. If it weren't for the shadow, he would have been dead ten times over already. But it held strong, slushing through his veins and organs, filling him with its dark infection, spreading the ache he was so familiar with until it blossomed into something far more terrible.

After love came loyalty. His need to protect all those he loved from harm. He pushed every moment he'd ever failed or succeeded in protecting others. Protecting Hermione from the Troll. Protecting Harry and Hermione from the chess set. Failing to protect Ginny from Tom Riddle. The determination to not ever let her hurt like that again. Failure to protect Harry from the tournament, aiding in hurting him. Failure to protect anyone at the Department of Mysteries. Even himself. Protecting Ginny and Hermione at the Battle of the Astronomy Tower. Protecting Tonks and Harry while traveling to Aunt Muriel's. Trying to protect them from himself.

Seven. Joy. Dancing with Hermione. Teaching Ginny how to hover on her broom. Hands guiding her as his sister's eager smile shined just for him. Handing Harry his presents, watching the ever surprised warmth in his best friend's eyes. His mother's hugs. His father's chatter. Those moments when Fred or George pulled him in for a secret. Feeling included. As if he were important.

Eight. Hope. Harry would be an Auror. He would conquer over Voldemort and his best friend would finally be able to *live*. Hermione would be brilliant at everything; at law, at gaining rights for muggleborns and elves and whoever the fuck else she decided to free. The future would be bright. No Voldemort or Death Eaters. Lucious Malfoy and Greyback and Beatrice and all those monsters would be dead or behind bars. His family would live. Thrive. The world over would know their name and know their victories and no one would ever stand against them again. There would be peace.

The fiendfire roared its approval as it came into being.

Fiendfire formed according to the creator's magic. For Dumbledore the fire beast had formed a Phoenix, for Crabbe, before it went berserk and spreading out like an ocean of death, it had been a serpent. For Ron Weasley, the creature before him was a Boston Terrier pup, its forked, long tail swishing back and forth, burning the floor beneath it.

The Train station was thrown from darkness to light.

Ron pulled his final trick out, an idea he'd been toying with for the entirety of his captivity. He flicked open the deluminator, but rather than allowing the light to return to its norm, or taking the fiendfire into the container, he drew it out, creating one long strand of light. He guided it forward, looping around the Dog Fiendfire, like a leash.

At the hellish sight of one Ron Weasley, shadow possessed, wielding a leashed fiendfire, most of the Death Eaters fled. The remaining took a weary step back, but did not retreat.

"Do you like my toy?" Ron rasped.

The floor began to melt under the fiendfire's paws. First white hot then a curling black ash. With a flick of his wrist it pounced. One Death Eater screamed, the flimsy water shield he pulled up doing nothing against the fire beast. He was consumed, the mask becoming a part of his body as it melted against him.

The others were more prepared. Reinforced shields being thrown up and fixed as quickly as they were being destroyed. It was hard. Reining the fiendfire in. Diverting it from the stairs and the train tracks. Like digging his fingers into ice to get at the dirt underneath. It stung and was only marginally successful.

Pius was the most successful. The man saw Ron's tactic, his avoidance of the muggle tracks. The man was keeping close to the rails, shooting off spells at him from far off. Ron had to concentrate on keeping the fiendfire under control and was incapable of using any other spells while the fire raged from his right hand with the wand and the deluminator's leash in his left hand. He could only doge and rely on the shadow to protect him.

The terrier growled, leaping forward and attacking shields left and right, two went down, one Death Eater escaping and rushing up a set of stairs while another had no chance to scream, his body blackening and crumbling even as the man tried to crawl away.

One by one they fell.

Until a different sort of light entered the area.

The headlights of an incoming train filled the Train station, illuminating Ron and the Death Eaters. It was accompanied by the automated voice of a muggle, informing them all that the E-line was docking. Ron cursed. The lights revealed Pius Thickness, staring at the approaching train with glee. It roared along the tracks, metal and glass, filled with innocent muggles.

Ron urged the fiendfire to desist, to retract, pulling his wand back with all the force left in him. The leash, deluminator light, sensing his intentions, began to retract.

But it was too late.

Pius Thickness pointed his wand at the incoming train and spoke the most unexpected of spells.

"Accio Train ."

Glass shattered. Metal contorted. And the train came. Wheels screeching and crunching against metal as it was forced out of its designated lane and onto the Train Station's small underground platform. Ron never saw the people inside, but he heard them. Voiced falling into sync in one chilling wail of fear.

Heading straight for him.

Ron closed his eyes, forcing peace and acceptance into his heart. Willing his fiendfire, at least, to not make this worse. He felt it fade away from his magic. A smallest flicker of fire extinguished.

Idly, he wondered what the unknown Pius had done before he became a puppet to the dark lord, before he hunted down innocent people and killed on a whim. It was an odd thought. Certainly not one Ron ever imagined would be his last ones.

He was spent though.

He was ready.

The train was a roaring monster. A flashing, thundering, roaring, flipping metal made contraption that blinded him and warmed his body as it pinned him in his corner. But the metal never touched his skin.

Out of nowhere a figure had him in his arms.



They were spinning.

The last sight of the Train Station Ron saw insignificant.

A shoe, crashing through glass, a flash of skin.

When he hit the ground next to the portkey, an empty latte cup, Ron threw up. Everything seemed to spill out before him; coffee, blood, black goo, water. And above him stood a man he knew, hated, despised. The instinctive need to spit in his face was overwhelmed by only one thing.

Passing out.

---

"Truly, Weasley, you do enjoy proving me wrong," a slow drawl echoed in his head, bouncing around like some slimy maggot. He recognized the voice instantly. That slow, condescending pronunciation. That 'mightier than though- you will all conceded to my ridiculous demands.' That wretched fucking traitor.

"Snape," Ron growled.

Or intended to growl. It came out like a wad of dry spit, sounding somewhere between 'rape' and a gargling noise.

"To think," Snape said slowly, greasy hair framing his face like horns. "that you could somehow be more *stupid* than you've already displayed in six years."

Ron shifted, the movement pure agony. He croaked out a scream before settling down. Snape remained standing, he offered no aide, just stared at him, unimpressed.

"Moving is a bad idea," Snape deadpanned.

' *Always fucking brilliant, aren't you?* ' Ron thought, trying to force those words into the look he sent his once Professor.

"Somehow you've managed to have more dark magic in your veins than actual blood," Snape told him. "I've healed your life-threatening injuries, but this cannot be undone. You will die."

*' And why do you give a flying fuck?'*

"I care," Snape sneered, as if he could read Ron's thoughts, "because you are one of three people who have been entrusted with saving our entire country. It's to be expected that I would have to clean up after your dismal display today. Destroying an entire muggle Train Station, revealing magic to an unknown, mass number of muggles, and abandoning your post with Potter and Granger."

*' FUCK YOU! Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!'*

He felt Snape begin to pry into his mind and with savage delight forced the words straight into the bastard's head. Snape flinched. Glaring down at Ron with beady black eyes. Then, raising an eyebrow at him, revealed a potion in his hands.

"It is lucky for you," Snape snarled as if they had not just gone to battle mentally, "that I am such a good Samaritan and that Dumbledore has gifted you his most prized possession. If not for your position in aiding Potter, I would never *dream* of bothering."

He was too pissed to consider what Snape was saying or what it meant. He was in too much pain to comprehend, really, the truth behind this moment. He wouldn't understand it fully until much later.

"This potion will burn through you," Snape softened, just a touch, the first signs of humanity showing through. "It will feel worse than anything you can imagine. It will not save you. But. It will give you time. It is the same potion I gave to Dumbledore when the fool put the Hocrux on his finger. It will feel as if your skin is peeling from your body, as if you are being hammered with nails of salt into your wounds. It will be excruciatingly painful and you will want to die. But. It will push the dark magical infection back. It will temporarily seal it away."

Snape lowered himself to the floor.

"I will give you this choice only once, Weasley. Listen carefully," Snape hesitated, before continuing. "The infection will kill you within the hour without this potion. If you want me to, I will kill you, I will end the pain you are in."

Ron didn't try to speak or think, rather, he stared blankly at the man who had taught him for the past six years.

"Or," Snape said softly, "I can give you this potion. I tell you right now, Weasley, it is not worth it. The pain is far more terrible, more unspeakable than I can describe. The extra year or so that you will gain will be remembering this moment. Dumbledore himself, a man far greater than either you or I, had nightmares every night until the moment I killed him. Once it begins, I will not kill you, no matter how much you beg. This is your decision, and I will help you honor it!"

He would be able to help Harry and Hermione. He would be able to tell them about the Taboo. He would be able to help destroy the remaining Hocruxes. He could tell them about Rose. He could tell them about the Snatchers.

For Ron, it was no decision at all. When he felt Snape prying at his mind, trying to see his answer, Ron pushed all of those thoughts and feelings forward. He stared at Snape, willing him to see his resolution.

Snape faltered, for a completely different reason, his eyes unreadable.

"Perhaps," Snape said slowly, as if the words tore at his throat, "all that stupidity hides someone truly splendid and brave."

Ron was so shocked even his natural instincts to fight were subdued as Snape gripped his jaw and poured the potion down his throat.

It was the most horrific three hours of his life. Beyond torture or the experimentation. Beyond any and all pain Ron would ever be able to put into words. He screamed and sobbed, not quite demanding Snape kill him, but bashing his head in the wall hard enough to have the man restrain him with chains.

It was days before he woke.

And when he did finally awaken it was to a wand directly in his face. Severus Snape altering his memories, maintaining only the most important facts. But most of all: removing all memories of the horrors of the potion, removing the knowledge that he would die, giving Ron one year to fight alongside Harry and Hermione. One year of no knowledge or torture or experimentation or death.

One year to live normally.

He placed them all inside of the deluminator and put the small device in Ron's hands.

"As usual, Potter is too dense and too focused on what he has lost, to recognize what he has right in front of him," Snape muttered. Then the double agent left the shack, black robes billowing out behind him. Within the hour, Ron Weasley arrived on Bill Weasleys door steps.

---

When Ron gasped and shot up into the arms of Harry Potter and Hermione Granger, the first words out of his mouth surprised them both.

"He's *still* the biggest asshole I've ever met."

"Ron!" Hermione threw herself at him.

"Who?" Harry asked.

"What?" Ron asked, staring at Harry.

"Whose an asshole?" Harry asked.

Ron blinked, looking around the manor, the roar of walls weakening and Inferi being cut down nearly overwhelming.

"What are we talking about?" Ron asked.

"You!" Harry said in frustration.

"Me? I'm an asshole?" Ron said in bewilderment.

Harry sighed.

"Yes, you are. Let's go."

"I don't understand what's going on," Ron muttered, glancing at Hermione.

"I don't either, but you're awake!" Hermione kissed him, hard, despite an unspeakably massive headache and every fiber aching.

"Do you two have to pick the worst times in the history of existence to do that?" Harry shouted in exasperation. Hermione broke away long enough to give Harry a grin and point at herself.

"Next time it's my turn to pretend to be dead."

"No, no, let's not do that," Ron muttered.

They helped him stand. Their arms reaching around his waist and across his shoulder's until he wasn't sure whose hands belonged to who.

"Did you see where Wormtail went?" Harry asked.

Ron shook his head.

"Not Wormtail. It's Press, a French Ambassador, he made a deal with Wormtail. He wanted to switch places with him, be the 'Dark

Lord's' right hand man. Wormtail just wanted to escape. Unfortunately for the them the ritual they were trying to perform didn't work. Only one of them transformed into the other."

"I only got about half of that," Harry admitted.

"How about I tell you later and we get the fuck out of here?" Ron bargained.

Harry looked fit to argue, but then he just rolled his eyes.

Iron rang out against marble.

Hermione whirled, her eyes wide as she stared down the path to the double doors they'd been meandering towards. Both were wobbling on the marble floor, bodies piling up on time, smoking as if blown there by a vicious spell.

"Marvelous idea," Hermione snarled, near hysterical, her mouth working its way into the closest thing to a curse either boys had seen. "Let's open the doors to where Antea and Ron are. Nothing could go wrong with that!"

"Antea?" Ron's head snapped up. "Do you know where she is?"

"I say we look for her while going in the opposite direction as them!" Harry called, a tad panicked, kicking away the broken, shattered remains of his broom.

Would Harry ever own a broom that didn't end in splinters?

The Inferi were in the manor. Crawling all over one another, random legs and arms dragging over each other to pull themselves further into the buildings entrances. Press must have lifted the protective enchantments before he fled. All the doorways were flooded with the creatures, snapping jaws and meat hanging bones, jerking and twitching their way into a mob-like infestation of human body parts.

"The prison cells upstairs have reinforced doors," Ron told them.

Hermione shifted her hold, her fingers tightening around his waist and pulling him closer to her. The sweat on her forehead wiping against his shoulder. Their height difference had never appeared so dramatic or ridiculous as it did in this moment, with Ron's entire weight leaning against her, his feet dragging as she urged him to move faster than he was capable of. The manor groaned around them, chunks of masonry dropping from the ceiling as they navigated towards the cells.

"The cells have a balcony the Death Eaters used to dump bodies from into the mass grave," Ron told them as they made their way up. Harry and Hermione grimaced. "We can use it to get out. Transfigure the vines into ropes or something."

"Can you get down from something like that?" Hermione asked, skeptical.

"Not a chance in hell," Ron said honestly. "You'll just have to levitate me down or something. Toss me off the side if you have to."

The joke fell on deaf ears.

"I'll tie you to me," Harry said.

"I'll go first, make sure there's nothing at the bottom to attack you while your arms are full," Hermione added.

"I thought we agreed plans are bad?" Ron joked again, but his voice cracked at the end and Hermione shushed him. Exhausted, Ron agreed to be quiet, but only after urging Harry to check all of the cells for Antea.

Then a memory slipped in. One that wasn't muddled in all the new memories swimming around in his head. One of Press, permanently transfigured into Wormtail's replica.

"She's outside."

"What?" Harry asked.

"Press said he tossed her outside with the Inferi because she was being too 'annoying.' We should still check the cells, but..." Ron trailed off in dread.

"Of course we will," Hermione snapped.

The manor creaked eerily.

"We should hurry," Harry said, pulling a bit more of Ron's weight onto him as they moved up the stairs. Ron gave them directions. The memories falling into place like waterlogged puzzle pieces. They checked the cells, each empty block ringing the ball of worry deeper and deeper until they arrived at the last one. It too was empty.

Press had never lied before.

But Ron had still hoped that they would find Antea shivering and miserably, but relatively okay inside the cells. Shaking, trembling, breaking apart walls were all that greeted them though.

Images of the dark skinned Irish woman torn apart appeared in his mind's eye. Ron had wandered the Inferi infested grounds for awhile while looking for the castle. He'd had his wand, as useful as that proved to be, and Harry's cloak (still wrapped around his shoulders, causing random body parts to disappear and reappear as it swished back and forth). Ante had nothing out there. What were the chances they'd passed each other by? That he'd missed her along the way?

What were the chances that there was nothing left to miss?

"I'm sure she's safe," Hermione murmured, her hand rubbing his back as he stared into the last cell.

"Mate, Ron," Harry said slowly, gazing at the reinforced doors. "She's not here. We need to go."

The *before it's too late* was left unsaid.



Ron hesitated in turning away anyways. This wasn't *just* the last cell. This cell had belonged to Mary Salen. Across from this one was his and Abigail's cell. This was the last place they'd been together before Abigail and Mary had died. The empty cell held more than just Antea's fate.

Hermione tugged at his fingers.

Harry tugged at his waist.

Together, as always, they dragged him from the brink of his dark thoughts and towards the light.

The balcony was a place Ron had avoided thinking about while in the cells. He'd avoided looked at the bodies dragged by and what lay at the bottom. It was a part of the cells more horrific even than the experiment room Press kept him in. It was the end of hope. The place where those who had not escaped the Death Eater prison were taken.

The edges of the balcony were stained red.

When Hermione saw it, she buried her face into his chest.

"You were always the best at transfiguration," Harry told her, gesturing towards the thick vines. "You handle those and I'll get Ron ready."

She nodded, pulling away from him reluctantly.

Then Harry was there. The boy who lived, who survived and conquered, tearing his jacket apart with his wand and transfiguring them into ropes that twined around the redhead. Ron kept himself steady by bracing his hand's on Harry's shoulder's. If they hindered his work, Harry didn't say anything, and Ron was grateful for that. Admitting that Harry was the only thing keeping him standing at the moment would have been humiliating.

The shout of an Auror sounded below.

A 'bang!' loud enough to rattle teeth sounded from the building. The floor morphed. Contorted. Harry grabbed at the ropes around Ron. Hermione took hold of Harry's arm, her wand pointing forward.

The building imploded.

# Last Resort Ch23

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Chapter 23: Last Resort

"Pitted against his worst fears and his worst sides,

Ron Weasley shows the ability to overcome his own faults and his own mistakes, while Harry Potter is given a free pass for his, and Hermione Grangers are ignored completely.

To me, Ron Weasley has had the most difficult journey, and has come out the most successful."

-Windschild8178

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*The first time Hermione realized she loved Ron Weasley, the boy had done nothing spectacular. In fact, he hadn't done anything at all. He'd laid curled up in a ball of long limbs in the common room, staring unhappily into the fire.*

*It had been a long, terrible day for everyone.*

*Harry had been accused of putting his name in the goblet of fire.*

*Ron had been one of the accusers.*

*Hermine had been stuck in between.*

*Everything that had happened, had occurred long before the midnight hour. The arguments. The agree silent. The worry. Even the conversation with Ron that had torn her apart.*

'I'll back him up no matter what. I'll do whatever he needs. I'll help him face the tasks,' Ron ranted. "But I won't be left on the sidelines. I

don't deserve that. I don't deserve to be treated like an outsider. Not by my best friend.'

*They were both so stubborn and bullheaded. Hermione was sure, absolutely positive, that Harry had not put his name into the goblet. Ron was too caught up in being hurt and angry to realize that. Harry was too caught up in feeling betrayed to see the other side.*

*For all the trouble though, as she sat across the room doing her homework, having talked to and reassured Harry that she believed him and would stand by him, having weeded out Ron's ridiculous reasons for believing in what Harry had clearly not done, it was here that she realized she was in love with Ron.*

*Ron who was loyal to a fault, but who also wasn't willing to be a bystander. Ron was no shadow. He was just as strong willed and brave as Harry Potter. Ron was no side kick. He had stood by Harry's side no matter what. Had followed Harry into the depths of danger in the traps under Hogwarts, into a forest full of car sized spiders, down into the Chamber of secrets, against teachers, against supposed Death Eaters, and real Death Eaters. Ron had stood by Harry's side and now... well, Ron felt that Harry had left him behind.*

*It as idiotic.*

*It was stupid and childish and clearly wrong. But it was Ron's feelings. And how many times had those been stomped on and ignored? Ron was standing up for himself, against his best friend, and while the actuality of the situation was wrong, the way Ron was unwilling to let it happen were impressive.*

*Ron was his own person.*

*And Hermione loved him for it.*

*So when she tucked away her homework for the night, she wandered over to the couch and plopped down beside him. She didn't tell him he as wrong. She just sat there. Her knees touching*

*his, her shoulder leaning against his much taller form. Eventually his tense form relaxed against her. His broody, tired expression filling with gratitude.*

*They stayed like that long into the night.*

---

What happened next was similar to what it must feel like inside a can, slowly being crushed inwards. The Floor beneath their feet shattered. The walls crumbled. The ceiling dropped.

Hermione reacted first.

A bubble shield encircling them as they plummeted down. But not fast enough. Neither of them saw the chunk of rock that hit the back of Hermione's head. Only the soft 'oh' of surprise before her eyes rolled into the back of her head.

Harry Reinforced the shield.

Ron dove for her. Somehow, between Harry's quick spell work and Ron's quick reflexes the three of them landed hard, but safely onto what was left of the split apart third story balcony. The one directly beneath the Death Balcony of the fourth floor. His entire body jarred with the landing, but with a grunt of effort he managed to keep Hermione firmly against his body.

"You two alright?" Harry shouted.

Ron felt for the back of Hermione's head, brushing his fingers through her thick mop of curls. A small gash left his fingers covered in blood, but not much. He nodded grimly to Harry who moved towards them. When Harry knelt, Ron saw all the color had drained from his face.

"Hermione?"

"Knocked out, is all," Ron reassured. Harry sagged in relief, though his concentration on the bubble shield never wavered. Bloody Hell. When had their life become so that a concussion made them breathe easy?

"We need to move!" Ron shouted. He grunted in effort as he lifted Hermione clear off the ground. His arms shook and his breathing became almost instantly haggard. Harry made as if to intervene, to take Hermione from him, but Ron shook his head. "I need you to cover us. I can't do spells, Harry, you need your hands free."

Harry pulled away, nodding grimly. Without uttering a word, Harry cast a lightening spell upon Hermione's body. The crippling pressure against his arms instantly lessened until it felt as if he carried little more than a feather. He nodded gratefully towards Harry.

Harry went first over the balcony. Gingerly dropping onto the second floor roof ten feet below, using the rope Hermione had created. He turned quickly, pulling out his wand and pointing at Ron. Without talking Ron knew what Harry wanted him to do. He threw one leg over the edge, carefully bringing Hermione with him, before swinging the other over.

"Wingardium Leviosa!"

Light as a feather Ron felt himself lifted into the air and set down gently onto the roof. They grinned like idiots. The sounds of chaos around them more ironic than either of them would ever admit. And just like that, it ended.

A great thundering roar filled the air. Ron's head shot upwards just in time to see a wayward spell from the battle below slam into the unstable nearly non-existent building.

The roof bent inwards, contorting unnaturally, throwing Ron with Hermione opposite of Harry. He felt more than saw his body hit the roof, his arms tightly wrapped around Hermione's body, the world a sickening mix of brown, black and orange.

Then he felt air.

Ron flung his arm out, fingernails digging into tile, an odd ripping noise filled the air. Hanging by his arm, Hermione awkwardly held between two legs and one arm, it wasn't until blood began to drip onto his cheek that he realized it had been his stitches coming loose. An odd mix of the string and flesh tearing apart.

"Ron!"

Ron blinked blearily upwards. His sight clouded in red liquid. A figure was several feet away on what appeared to be a ledge. A distant part of his brain wondered what a ledge was doing on the side of a building, every other part begged it to shut up. Spells going amidst in every direction and hanging for dear life near fifty feet above the ground took priority.

"My Wands gone," Harry's voice called out. There was an edge of panic in his voice. Ron imagined he and Hermione didn't paint the best of pictures. He shook his head, blinking the blood away. The blurry ledge came into focus, showing a transfigured portion of the building to only look like a mountain ledge. Bent metal and plaster sprang out of the wall, forming one solid, if not Picasso impression, place to stand.

And it was lower than them. It was a bit far, but if he...

Ron grunted, gripping the rough tiles so tight the tips of his fingers began to bleed. Slowly, he began to rock himself and Hermione. He let her slip from his legs, let her body dangle from his one hand. Harry got the idea immediately. He opened his arms wide.

Any other person in the world and Ron wouldn't have chanced it. But this was Harry. And this was Hermione. Harry would cut his arm off with a rusty metal toothpick before fowling this up.

"On three!" Harry called.

"On three," Ron croaked.

Then it happened. He felt his fingers slip. The blood making the tiles slick.

"On one!" Ron roared, pushing off with his feet and slinging Hermione towards Harry. The last thing he saw was Harry grasping hold of Hermione's waist, eyes widened in shock and terror, mouth opening to say something before he dropped two stories.

Ron felt his hand wack against the wall, instinctively he rolled away from it, his body moving further away from the building as he fell. His eyes watered, blurry colors stretching across his entire sight. Then it cleared on one solid object. Or rather. One solid person. Running from the chaos on short legs into a clearing of forest.

Press.

Ron partial apparated.

His body exploded in pain and magic, everything aglow from his clothes to his skin to the drops of blood hanging in midair around him. Ron brought his shoulder up to ram into the familiar back of Wormtail. Press didn't even know what hit him. They hit the ground, but Ron rather than cut the magic off he shot his head up, focusing in on one of the high trees around them.

If he stopped using the magic then that was it. He wouldn't be able to move anymore after this. The moment he stopped partial apparating he was as good as dead.

His body moved. He twisted so his feet would land on bark, his eyes focusing in on Press as the man stumbled to his feet, eyes looking around wildly for his attacker. In the moment their eyes met, Press jerked back, raising his wand, but Ron was already moving.

He rammed into the man again. The bandages on his left arm exploded in light. Golden drops of blood floating in the air as he hit



the ground, rolled, turned his eyes to another object. A boulder. He aimed for the tip. His hands gripping it as if he were light as a feather. His feet landing on the stone for the briefest of moments before Ron turned. Icy blue eyes landing on his prey once more.

And for the briefest of moments before Ron moved again, Abigail stood there, lungs showing, hands reaching out for him. There was a demand in her eyes. A screaming, roaring expectation from him to make this man pay for what he'd done. To her. To Rose and Salen. To Ron. To every nameless face they did not know about. He wouldn't label it as revenge or justice or anything like that. It was more primal. An instinct to strike.

Ron partial apparated, slamming his full body into Press's own, hands gripping the man's shoulders as his eyes landing on the last object. A broken tree. Its branches were sprayed out from its trunk in jagged assortments like a twisted group of hands reaching to drag you under the ground.

There was no hesitation. No moral debate about human life. And there would be no self-loathing or regret later on. Because, at the end of the day, he was not Harry Potter. He was Ron Weasley.

He heard Press make a noise, something between a grunt and furious indignation. He felt the tip of a wand being jammed into his stomach. Imagine the man smiling in triumph. But he didn't look. He didn't need to. All his attention was on the tree. In the span of seconds they cleared the distance of the woods. Two bodies slammed into jagged roots.

Roots shot through the enlarged stomach of Press in three separate places, the tips of each them moving forward still, until they pierced the right hip of Ron. Press looked up at him in surprise, Wormtails mouth working out the beginnings of disbelief, perhaps the start of a scream, but then the eyes went blank. Press was dead, and the fake impersonation of Peter Pettigrew, with him.

Ron's magic cut out. He screamed, pulling away from the tree with a sickening tear of flesh, to fall backwards into the dirt of the forest floor. His body convulsed and he gagged as blood filled his throat. He flipped onto his stomach, his blood no longer running gold, but red, red, red. All over the place.

*' I'm going to die.'*

Ron stilled his movements. Listening to the sounds of battle in the background it hit him that this was a lot better than he'd pictured it would be the last seven months. He wasn't alone in some hospital bed far away from the ones he loved. He wasn't high on drugs and unaware of his impending doom. He was awake. In pain worse than he'd felt in a long time, but awake and aware none the less. He'd saved Hermione. Harry and Hermione were going to be just fine and it was mostly due to him. They were safe. And he'd done that.

He was okay with this.

He was okay.

He felt his body convulse again. The jerks felt as if they were tearing about his very being. And the blood just kept coming. It seemed to be everywhere. Almost... darker than blood. Ron squinted his eyes and almost laughed. It was black. It was the cursed dark magic sliding out of his skin all at once. Pulling around him like a circle of death. His scars practically glowed darkness. Like that day in the prison cells.

Ron closed his eyes. His body was sagging now. Going blissfully numb. He couldn't feel his arms or back. Even his legs, the most unaffected part of his body, seemed not even connected to him. He sighed. And began to let go.

Footsteps.

Large footsteps that thudded too loud, too large to be a normal person. Ron smiled without opening his eyes. Hagrid. He wouldn't be

alone then. The very thought warmed him in a way he hadn't felt in a long time.

Ron opened his eyes to take in his large friend, but came face to face with Ray Spinsor instead. He jerked away from the man. Spinsor's familiar smirk spread out into a knowing smile. The part troll rolled his neck as he came near, large boots strolling almost leisurely as he came closer.

"How..." Ron croaked.

Spinsor stopped, giving Ron a considering look.

"Same way you 'caped I suppose," the man drawled, peering past him at Press's lifeless body with as much interest as examining a dead rat. "Chaos of an attack. Most of the forces distracted. Careless guards."

Spinsor shrugged nonchalantly.

"Course I didn't go all black eyes on anyone. Just a quick snap of the neck with these."

Spinsor raised his overly large hands, turning them over and over again as if he'd never realized quite how strong they could be. Then Spinsor stepped forward and slammed his foot into Ron's stomach.

Ron vomited, a mixture of stomach acid, blood, and bile hitting the ground to dilute the black magic already there. His vision began to fade, leaving his world filled with shadows. Spinsor's large, fuzzy figure leaned over him.

"I was going to spend the rest of my life in prison." Spinsor seethed. "Because a couple brats beat the dark lord. You know how unhappy that makes me feel?"

A boot slammed into Ron's shoulder.

His body lifted off the ground with the hit, skidding several feet along sharp rocks and dirt. He hardly felt it though. He didn't even have the strength to curl into a ball at this point. The last of the tingling had gone away. He had nothing left.

*' Not quite true.'*

A voice inside him reminded him softly. Ron blinked. Spinsor was talking again, but Ron couldn't hear what he was saying. The familiar dark magic felt as if it were all coming to the surface. Ron reached for it, his fingers dipping into the black liquid that was, even at this moment, sliding out of his scars. Ron mentally shook himself, pushing the dark magic down. Forcing it to keep away from him.

Spinsor's voice came back into focus.

"... be harder to get to, of course, much harder than the mudblood, but nobodies impossible to get to." The man was telling him.

Mudblood.

*' Hermione.'*

"But even the boy who lived will let his guard down eventually. And then I'll strike. And I'll be the one who took down the golden trio. One. At. A. Time."

*' Harry.'*

He couldn't feel his limbs, but somehow he managed to get his arms under him enough to push up. He blinked hard, willing his eyesight to return to him for a little while longer, but Spinsor's figure remained fuzzy.

"What's this now?" Spinsor mumbled, but there was a laugh in his voice. "You think you can take me, kid?"

*' I have to... protect them. I can't die while this man still...'*

The dark magic licked eagerly from the inside out. It wanted out. Knew, somehow, that he was dying and wanted to escape. Ron wondered if doing this would somehow release something worse into the world than the man before him. Though what, he wasn't sure. There was a small voice telling him, he should take the darkness to his grave. That Hermione and Harry could handle this man. But it seemed like a betrayal to them. After everything they'd been through he couldn't bear to betray them more than he had.

*' Okay.'*

Agony. One moment his body was numb... the next it was as if he were more alive and in more pain than ever before. He was no longer nearly dead on the ground, but standing. He could see, clear as day. Black threads were everywhere. All around them. Forming a wall of spinning death and darkness. Thin tendrils attached to him, pulling at his skin.

"What is this?" Spinsor roared over the noise.

Deafening noise. A whirlwind of air, almost as if they were inside a portkey being transferred across the globe, but they were standing still. There was no object shared between them. Spinsor took a step back, his head turning upwards to examine the black spinning cyclone.

"What have you done?!"

Ron said nothing. It all hurt too much. He felt tears sliding down his face. He looked down to see the edges of his scars widening. The crisscrossing marks spreading like spiderweb along his body. He shuddered as tiny pieces of skin began to rise up and burn away.

Spinsor raised his wand at the same time Ron raised his hand. Avada Kadavra never made it passed the man's lips. Black tendril's shot towards him. The man screamed in shock, eyes widening as his body was pushed into the whirlwind. The left side of his body hit the spinning darkness. Muscles, skin, blood, bone, all separating as if

parts of an intricate puzzle, before turning to black ash. The right side of his body hit the ground. Blood and flesh leaking across dirt and leaves in horrifying contrast.

Ron fell to his knees as his body further deteriorated. He lied. He wasn't ready to die. He didn't want to die like this. Ron hugged himself as he stared down at what was left of Spinsor's body. He rocked back and forth, choking on a sob as he felt his body tearing itself apart.

"Help me."

Blood and black dripped from his mouth.

"Harry. Hermione," Ron called quietly. "Please. I don't want to die alone."

As if in answer, two patronuses burst through the darkness, a stag and an otter. The otter swirled around him worriedly, spreading warmth and dulling the pain. The stag wove around the dark tendrils, trying desperately to break them, but being thrown back each time. A clear panicked voice shot out of the stag as it continued to attack the tendrils.

"We're coming for you! Don't give up, Ron, we are coming!"

Even from here Ron could feel the love and sincerity in Harry's words. He knew it would be too late, but its presence, Harry's presence made him smile. Then the Otter turned to him, gentle against his ear as it spoke. As Hermione spoke.

"I love you. Every moment of every day of every minute I love you. You give me those minutes, those days, those years back by fighting right now. Fight!"

He could feel her passion and love all around him. The otter circled him once more, spreading its light around every inch of his body. The stag, unable to break the tendrils, raced towards him and began to

circle as well. Faster and faster until they seemed to become a dome of light around him.

The pull of the tendrils became less strong. Ron breathed a sigh of surprise. Before cringing as the darkness seemed to roar in anger. He felt it violently jerk. He screamed as part of his body seemed to tear with it. The tendrils thickened again. He curled in on himself. The otter and stag cried out in dismay, their forms becoming visible once more in the stream for the briefest of seconds.

Then they strengthened once more.

Darkness rained down on the dome. It was like he was inside of a thunderstorm. Black striking the blue dome of light in anger. Ron sensed its fear. It's panic. If it could not leave then it would die along with Ron. He knew this instinctively, without being told.

And then he saw *him* .

It was the old man. And it was his shadow. The shadow woven around him like a dark cloak. Twisting his features. Making him look inhuman. Like the shadow that had attacked him the day at the Ministry. Shadow and Man had come together again to survive. Ron watched as the man's mouth opened too wide, a set of inhuman sharp black teeth gaping back at him.

The shadow man disappeared into the swirling whirlwind once more. The tendrils suddenly thickening, the black web like magic spreading without pause. His vision blurred and Ron sense that this was it. He mouthed words to the Patronuses, hoping they could hear his silent message. Hoping they could deliver one final meaning to them.

And then arms wrapped around him.

The tendrils snapped, as if mere pieces of string. A hand. A very familiar hand made of golden light, slipped inside of his chest, and when I came out, it held in it a black squirming mass. The fingers

held it in place as if they were made of steel, as if the simple palm were a fortifiable prison.

He could feel his breath come easier. The pain no less severe, but *it* was gone. The shadow. The dark magic eating away at him. It no longer was there. The crisscrossing and web like scars remained, but they began to fade from the throbbing black into open gashes.

Ron twisted his head, startled by the presence of his brother: Fred. His body was glowing, a gentle, mischievous expression Fred rarely wore in life. But it was Fred. Here. With him now. Instinctively he tried to grab onto the arms around him, but his fingers fell through. Fred could touch him, but he could not touch Fred.

The patronuses slowed, the protective force of his brother keeping the dark whirlwind at bay. His Otter came up to him, nuzzling him reassuringly. His Stag knelt its head down towards him in support. Fred's eyes followed them, before they found Ron.

"Ronnie," the arms squeezed tightly, "You know, I should have known. About this. About your illness." There was a long pause as Fred stared the stag in its eyes, before they lingered on the otter protectively hovering above.

Then Fred revealed an object in his other hand. The deluminator. His brother reached out his hand and, with an impossibly gentle touch, placed it into his bloody one.

"It's been protecting you this whole time. Stopping it from escaping after its used you for so long," Fred explained. "It was killing you, but it planned to take your core with you, so it could survive when it left. The deluminator's light kept it trapped in your scars. It protected you from that creature both physically and mentally."

"Mentally?" Ron asked.

"Rose is the embodiment of everyone whose ever needed you. Do you remember what you thought of her the first time she



'appeared'?"

It took him a moment before it clicked.

*' Mature for her age... like Hermione.'*

He looked at the Otter and it stared back at him with steady, sure eyes. Then his eyes lingered on the Stag, its protective stance unmovable.

*' But... shy and kind... like Harry.'*

From the very beginning he'd known Rose was like them. It had never struck him as odd though. He'd just found that it had allowed him to be attached quickly. More than a normal child.

"A child like Harry and Hermione," Fred said, reading his mind. "Who looked like Abigail. Who was Salen's daughter. Who possessed the name of the baby given to you."

Ron's hand tightened around the deluminator. The two sets of memories conflicting and paralleling themselves in his mind. The deluminator hummed as he pulled it closer to himself. And through it all Fred continued talking. More serious than Ron had ever heard him, even when the young man had stood up to their mother and announced that he and George were joining the Order.

"It created Rose while you slept. It gave you something to fight for. Someone to fight for. It wanted to prod your memories. To bring back all those you shut out to survive. To remind you that there were still two people who needed to be rescued."

Fred's sad brown eyes met his.

"But why would it..."

"The deluminator can only be used by individuals like you and Dumbledore. It's bonded to you now, until you pass it on to another with your abilities."

"But I don't have any..."

"An affinity to fire. Light in its purest form."

Ron's mouth snapped shut. The memory of vanilla candles and burnt flesh coming back to his mind with a vengeance. He tried to grab Fred's hand again, but the tips of his fingers sunk in. Loss washed over him all over again.

"I miss you," Ron blurted out.

His mind felt fuzzy. He felt everything going black and knew that he wanted Fred to know this before whatever happened... happened.

"I love you. Everyone loves you so much. I..."

Fred smiled at him sadly.

"I know."

Ron stopped talking. He felt his body slumping forward. It no longer had anything to give to anyone. The only thing keeping him up was Fred. The darkness still whirled around them both, stopping either from leaving. Fred leaned forward, taking Ron into a strong embrace. His brother kissed the top of his head before pulling away.

"I love you all back, just as much," Fred told him softly. "And... Ronnie, I need you to watch George for me, okay? Me and George, as much as we always gave you a hard time, there was no one we ever trusted more. Not Harry, not Bill or Charlie, it was always you. Never doubt that."

Fred squeezed his shoulder one more time before standing. Then his older brother turned all of his attention to the thing wiggling around in his hand. It shrieked and screamed in anger, the dark whirlwind moving in towards them in response. Its small body burst out from Fred's palm, becoming the shadow man in its full glory.

Fred motioned to the two Patronuses. The stag bowed in response before moving over to Ron. Knowing what his brother intended Ron reached around the his Stag's neck, it knelt down, his Otter pushing at him, weaving around him in support. With a great deal of effort he managed to get his leg over the body of the patronus. He hugged it tightly, burying his face into its warm fur.

The shadow man lunged, but Fred blocked it with is body, raising one fist Fred ploughed it straight through the heart of the creature. It screamed and yanked, but could not escape Fred's tight hold. Light burst from Fred in threads, rising up and encircling each of the individual strands of darkness until an opening was created.

The stag shot forward. Ron tightened his hold as it burst through the small hole into the night's air. He doesn't remember it landing. Doesn't remember Harry's strong arms catching him, holding him tight. Doesn't remember Hermione sobbing into his shirt as Healer's encircle them. Ron doesn't remember his family, pale faced and stricken running up to them. Nor does he remember Hagrid's arms carrying him to the port key that takes them to the hospital or how the man managed to find them.

He doesn't remember Hagrid unbottling Phoenix tears. The last gift from Dumbledore, the closest Hagrid had to a father figure, nor how Hagrid carefully poured the Phoenix tears across the various gashes across his body. Then finally, the last of the tears, down his throat.

He does remember Fred. Fist coming back out, the creature screaming as it burst into a million tiny pieces of ash. He does remember the whirlwind imploding on itself and Fred still left standing, glowing like a thousand suns. He does remember the smile and tears on his brothers face as he too bursts into countless pieces of light.

# Epilogue

Final Disclaimer for Stay Standing: I do not own Harry Potter.

## Epilogue

"The scars are like empty eye sockets now, pockets waiting for memories or magic to fill them," Healer Oort explained, eyeing the papers in front of him with apprehension. "It's permanent. There's no getting around it."

Hermione squeezed Ron's hand.

"Isn't there a way to... fill it? But with good magic? Magic that won't become infected," Hermione urged.

Both Harry and Hermione were beside Ron as the Healer eyed them in uncertainty. They'd insisted on coming for the 'big news' in concerns to what was left of the magical infection. The good news was 'nothing.' The bad news was that Ron's scars still had the potential to take things in. The gaping magical pockets along his skin left by the infection could still cause problems in the future.

"What about the patronus charm?" Harry suggested.

"I'm sorry, but whatever do you mean by that? What about it?" Healer Oort asked, blinking skeptically at the boy who lived.

"What if we put good memories, like what we would use to make a patronus, into his scars? Filled them. Almost like a living pensive."

"It's dangerous," Healer Oort said hesitantly. "I can't even begin to imagine what would happen if a contaminated or dark memory were placed in him."

"But it's possible?" Hermione jumped onto the rope. "What if we we're to do it. Put our most positive, pure memories into those

scars?"

Healer Oort swallowed.

"That would require a great deal of trust. Those memories, your feelings and thoughts, would be able to be seen by him. He might even dream of those memories. It would be quite the invasion of privacy on your part, Miss. Granger. And as much as I hate to bring up such a delicate, intimate topic... there is always the possibility that you two might split up. Then those fond memories would turn dark, no matter how positive."

Hermione squeezed Ron's hand, the hand that had always been larger than hers, the one that, no matter how terrible the times were or how angry they were at each other, could always be trusted to carry her through to the end of the day. Ron *a/ways* came back and perhaps she'd taken that for granted before, but never again.

"It would be both of us," Harry interrupted the Healer. Hermione smiled, reaching out for Harry's much smaller, but no less reliable hand. Harry's fingers were warm, something that Ron still wasn't capable of, what with the many medicines the Healers still had him on fore the residue ache and pain.

"Both of you?" Healer Oort said, eyeing the three of them. "It would only increase the risk of at least one of the memories turning bitter or dark. I wouldn't recommend one none the less two."

"I trust them," Ron spoke up for the first time. "Unconditionally. I'm afraid, for good or bad, these two idiots have my heart. No one else."

Harry smacked Ron on the shoulder, but Hermione just moved closer, squeezing with all of her might, rubbing at his shoulder to try to give him warmth. Healer Oort pursed his lips, tapping his papers into an orderly fashion.

"I am highly against such a plan, Mr. Weasley, but as all other options are far more likely to cause him to relapse, it is the best

course of action. I do ask that you take the time to consider all of the memories you wish to use. I want to go over them with you and discuss possible repercussions. I want a written summary of each memory. If I suspect the memory has any ability to turn over time then I will veto it."

Despite herself, Hermione was impressed.

"Agreed."

"But..." Harry said, sounding irritated.

"This is one homework that you will not get out of doing, Harry James Potter," Hermione said lowly, eyeing him in challenge.

"Not what I was protesting!" Harry said, both hands up. "But don't you think Ron should be the judge of this?"

Beside her, Ron shook his head.

"I don't think so, mate, this is one thing I'm more than admitting is way out of my depth. Pick away. Like I said, I trust you guys."

"Alright then, I'll give you a week to decide and bring your decisions forward to me," Healer Oort announced. "Don't take this the wrong way, Mr. Weasley, but if this is one of the last appointments I have with you, I will be a much happier man. Your treatment has been the stuff of nightmares."

"I will happily spend the rest of my life avoiding any and all hospitals," Ron agreed.

---

"Yah understand why I'm so unhappy, boyo?" A voice growled from just outside the front door of their apartment. Ron grinned as he walked over to the front door, shooting Hermione a 'come here' gesture as he opened the door. Antea stood on the other side of it. The black Irish woman pursing her lips and arms crossed.

"I have an idea," Ron said.

"Oh, yeah have an idea?" Antea mocked. "Ya got a little idea inside that fat red head of yours, do ya?"

"Just a little one," Ron agreed easily, exchanging bemused looks with Hermione.

"Stark ravin' naked! In the feckin' nude! Up a tree they found me! And where are my clothes, ya ask? In the teeth of a feckin' Inferi! That's how an entire league of bloody Aurors found me! And where was my knight? Not in the tree with me, noooo, boyo was too busy killin' himself fer a feckin' lunatic. Jumps off a cursed building, they tell me, fights against two Death Eaters, they tell me. And when I finally find ya, there's only a corpse on the ground with a bunch o' bloody feckers' crying their god damn eyes out! Wailing!"

"I didn't die," Ron points out.

"No yeah didn't, but I thought ya did."

Ron's not entirely sure he deserves the hit he gets.

"I only just got out of the hospital!" Ron protests, touching his head.

"Well, so did I! I 'ave to make up for lost times, now don't I? Who visits me, yeah ask? Traux. Anybody eles?"

"I was in the room next to yours for a week. Unconscious," Ron protests.

"Yet here I am and where's the introductions?" Antea demanded, marching into the room and giving the place a once over. "Been here nearly five minutes and I still haven't heard nothin' proper from you. A lady standing here, having to introduce herself, did your mother not teach you anything?" Not waiting for Ron's reply, Antea stretched her hand out to Hermione, giving a small dramatic bow. "Antea Sissily. At your service, lass."

"Pleasure," Hermione said, not quite fighting a grin, "Hermione Granger."

"Not a lass, then, but the lass," Antea says in satisfaction, looking her up and down. "And your lad, boyo, where is he?"

Ron opened his mouth when said 'lad' came stumbling out of the bedroom.

"Was all the racket about?" Harry grumbled.

"Save yourself!" Ron yelled.

"Never did I think you'd get lucky to have two nice lookin' ones," Antea said thoughtfully. "Thought fer sure one of them be a nasty blighter. Good on you, Ron!"

"He has a girlfriend," Ron called out in exasperation.

"Ai! But I'm bettin' thirteen gallons that won't be lastin' long."

"Against who?!" Ron demanded aghast.

"Traux."

"I'm never introducing either of you to any of my family," Ron decided.

"Fair enough, I've met the important ones."

"Thank you?" Harry said, turning around and wandering back to bed.

"Where did you find her?" Hermione whispered.

"In the pits of hell, apparently," Ron muttered back.

---

The day his scars turned a vivid blue with Harry and Hermione's memories, he felt more complete than before it all began, back in



that horrible department of mysteries. The memories his confidence with their views of him. They lent to the idea of forgiving himself for leaving him, because he felt their forgiveness. They gave him strength through the power of their love and fondness of him.

The scars still whispered small things to him, but it was of small moments shared between the three of them in front of the fire or huddled in a room or studying over their homework. When he needed warmth, it provided a fire that seemed inextinguishable.

The day his scars turned blue, Ron felt prepared to use the red jacket in Bill's home. Tucked safely away in a box under the guest bedroom's bed.

"Ready to be parents?" Ron asked Harry and Hermione.

Harry shrugged.

"I'm already a great godfather, this is just one more step," Harry answered.

"Not read in the least," Hermione answered, "but I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be than right here," Hermione answered. She'd prepared a baby bag, stacked to the brim with everything but the crib, which Harry had put his foot down on bringing with them.

Ron was too excited and terrified to the reasonable one.

What if she'd been adopted? Could Ron really take her from a happy home? No, he couldn't. He would be forced to leave her with them until she turned eleven. Maybe he could convince McGonagal to let him go instead of a teacher. Introduce himself as her godfather and tell her about the wizarding world.

What if he'd messed up the port key? What if it didn't go to her at all? What if they just stayed in the room and weren't transported anywhere? The thought had been running in his mind since they'd

discussed it in the hospital. What if Rose had been adopted by bad people and Ron wouldn't know until she turned eleven?

Ron looked at Harry and shuddered. He would never know unless he tried.

"Alright, on the count of three," Ron said.

"One," Harry counted.

"Two," Hermione added.

"Three!"

They grabbed the jacket. The familiar sickening tug enveloped them. Harry had him around the waist, as he still wasn't quite strong enough to travel by himself. He felt his fingers slacken the tiniest bit, but Hermione's other hand reached out and covered it.

They landed on their feet.

They also startled the living daylights out of a muggle woman. She shrieked, but before she could make another sound, Hermione already had her wand out and pointing. Ron spun around, looking at the room they were in, and sighing in relief. It wasn't a home and the muggle woman wasn't the adopted mother of Rose. It was large, hosting six or seven young toddlers.

Ron turned, searching for Rose, and found her staring at him with the biggest blue eyes. Eyes he hadn't seen in over a year. The one year old sported Mary's brown locks of hair, but the eyes belonged to her wizard father, a man Ron had never met.

"Is that her?" Harry asked.

Ron nodded, bending down and scooping the one year old up.

"Hi," Ron said.

Rose instantly grabbed onto his finger, still staring up at him with that intense focus. He felt Hermione's hand loop through his, saw her fingers gently reach out and cup the toddlers face. When he dared to break eye contact with Rose, it was to find Hermione Granger in love.

"She's beautiful," Hermione whispered.

"She's ours," Ron told her. "Our very own Rose Mary Weasley."

"Teddy is going to be thrilled," Harry announced.

After a long moment Ron pulled them into his arms. Holding them both there, with Rose between them. His family. His lad and lass and his little girl.

"Let's go home."